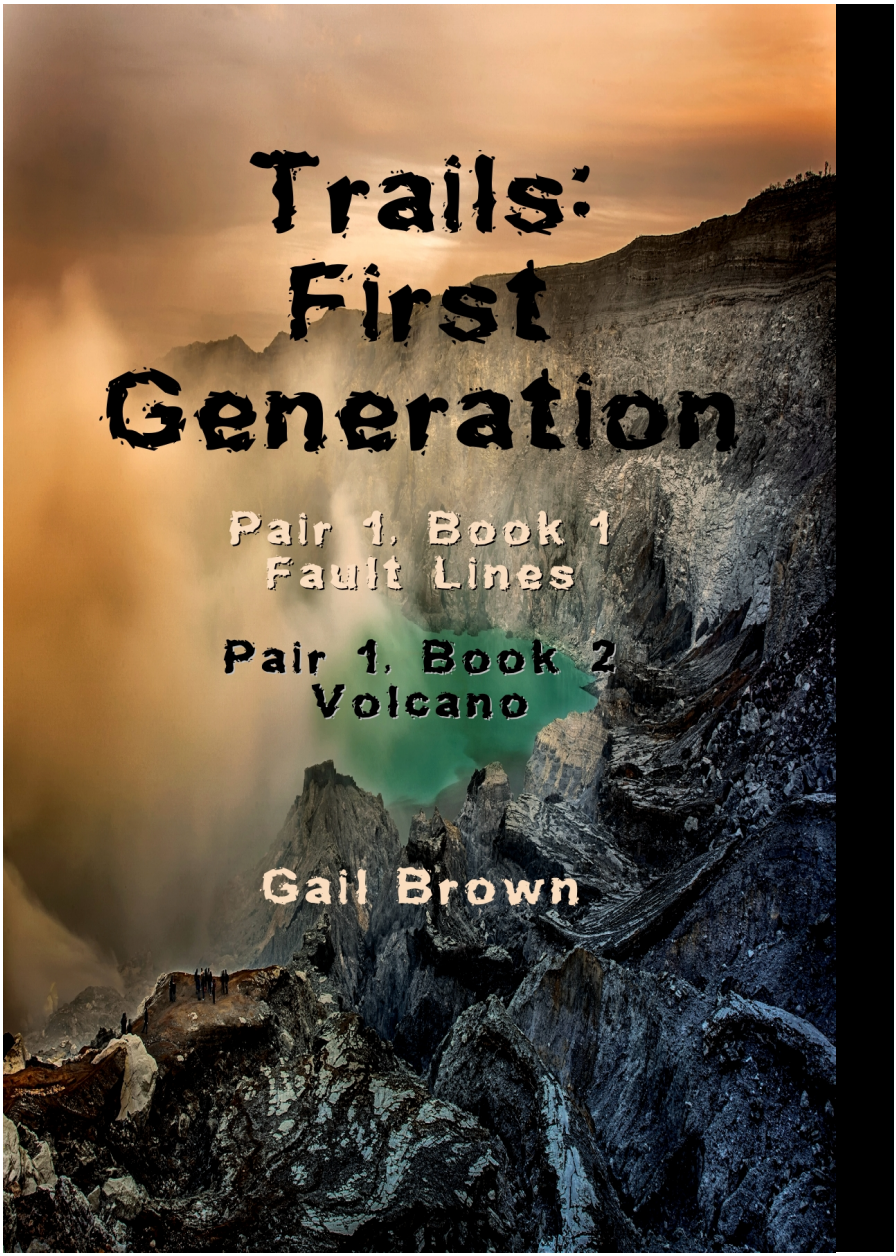
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First
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Pair 1, Book 1
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Gail Brown

Trails: First Generation

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Trails: First Generation

Fault Lines

Pair 1, Book 1

Gail Brown

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Acknowledgements

Dreaming science fiction was something that happened soon after reading my first science fiction book. For years, I wanted to write some. I once had a novel started, although, I never finished and lost the story decade ago.

A tremendous thank you to all who offer help that often you never see the results of. Years later, even decades later, those you help, will remember the assistance you gave.

May this novel assist others on their search for hope and acceptance in world often not designed for them.

Chapter 1

Parkfield, California

Amber shifted in her chair at the front of the geology classroom.

The teacher explained her version of the geologic history behind the 1906 San Andreas Fault quake.

Some of the myths were close to reality. Others made the news as a sensation at the time, and no one corrected the mistakes.

Amber groaned at one story in particular. Leaders knew the water infrastructure was too weak to handle fires, with no intention of updating lines. They even gave up a famous designer's dream plan of the city, both in the weeks before, and the weeks after the quake.

Behind her and Karen, the rest of the room couldn't hear the teacher. Students laughed, joked, and planned the evening's festivities. The high school spring dance tonight filled their hearts and minds more than a history they couldn't see or touch.

Parkfield nestled merely miles away, the epicenter of many of California's deadliest earthquakes. The others should be listening, regardless of the accuracy of the geology teacher's information. A paper plane whizzed by her head and hit the map near the quake's historic epicenter.

Amber's cell phone vibrated. She glanced down at the text message. "Increased activity. Will be in the field tonight. Pick you up to help us after school."

The teacher droned on.

Amber ignored her. It would be more fun to be at the research center, determining the current quake's epicenter, rather than stuck at home watching the computer.

She turned to Karen. "We are going to the field tonight."

"Great!" The bell rang, and everyone jumped up to go to the next class. "See you in an hour."

Amber sat down in senior history class. She never did well in history. Except on the ancient time scale, the history of science, especially geology.

The teacher rattled on about how Roman civilization survives in the current era. Laws and construction examples rambled into a jumbled mass.

Amber ignored her. The mountains and valleys of California had survived the ages of time. Today's series of minor quakes would have adjusted them, imperceptible to most. Any movement would affect the future. Out there, measuring, and predicting the next quake would be far more interesting than studying the people of the past. The month until her summer internship, stretched on endlessly.

"Amber?" The teacher raised her eyebrow.

Amber highly doubted the history teacher would ask her to explain geology to the class. It was easiest to confuse everyone anyway. "Mom is spending so much time in Parkfield. Lots of little earthquakes we may not even recognize. We should be thinking about how they will change our future, geographically, and financially."

"Earthquakes? They happen all the time. We ignore them," one person behind her said.

"There was a rumble a few minutes ago. Didn't you feel it? Scared you?" That boy lounged in his chair, feet sprawled in the chair in front of him, with his head on the desk behind him.

Her face didn't even turn red anymore as the class laughed.

The teacher didn't laugh. She shook her head and turned to someone else.

The release bell soon overrode the teacher's drone.

Amber's mom drove them to their study location.

Rocky walls glistened. Amber grasped her trowel and gently removed the outer layer of dust from the colorful lines within the rock. Swirls of color intrigued her to search deeper. By tracing their path through the rock, she could read their history. More swirls meant a highly geologically active region.

Her trowel hit an object. She sighed. Another arrowhead, most likely. Oh well, the archeological team could check, and she could clear another bank.

"Karen, call the assistants. I found something."

"Oh, what is it?" Karen brushed up against her, and peered deep into the grooves between the rocks.

"Not sure. Don't want them to yell at us for damaging something important." Amber leaned back. The archeological team had set up next to her mom and Brandon. There had been too many tremors of late, to skip caution.

Rocks skittered down the embankment to her feet.

Clutching the trees above them stood five teens from their senior class.

"Scared ya, huh?" One girl said.

Amber couldn't even remember her name.

The teen slid down the hill. "Jerry said you'd be here. He wanted to see Karen, no idea why." She laughed and sauntered off away from the work center, followed by her friends.

Jerry was the last to slid e down the embankment. "Sorry Karen. I said I was coming out here, and they insisted on following."

He glanced at Amber.

Jerry touched Karen's hand. "Can we walk, alone?"

Karen's face glowed red.

Amber turned back to the bank. "Not my decision. You better ask Brandon."

Karen grabbed her arm. "He'll never let me go without you."

Amber pulled back. "Tell him to come over with the archeology team. Mom won't be back for half an hour. You can stay on that side of the clearing, in sight, and out of hearing, if you really want to. And holler if anything important comes up."

Karen hugged her. "You're the best friend in the world."

"Uh huh. Hope Jerry's friends didn't destroy a priceless work of history."

"I'm sure they didn't." Karen grabbed Jerry's hand and raced off to the instrument mound in the center of the ravine.

Joking about quakes could be dangerous. It hadn't been too long ago, geologically, that where she was standing would have been deep inside the earth. She touched the twists that showed how the earth moved and opened the ravine. If not those specific twists, then ones very similar, and nearby. Pebbles had rattled loose by the earlier quakes from today. One level of soil appeared pushed up higher than last week's observations.

"Hey Amber, what'd you find?" Brandon asked.

"Good question. Probably an arrowhead." She pointed to the darkened earth. One of the archeological students looked the area over.

"Might be. Or might be campsite soil. I'll have to check it." The student eagerly grabbed her tools and set to work examining the dark lines. Her friends scribbled her words onto the paper to be transcribed later.

More of a wait. If only Amber could find something important about quake history, and unveil something no one else knew, then her mom and Brandon might take her more seriously.

"Let's check over here," Brandon said.

He led her them to another section still covered in plants clinging by thready roots to cliff walls. "Tell me what you think these swirls mean."

Amber sighed. At least Brandon included her, and wanted her to learn. This was her life's work, and she didn't enjoy explaining it to others, especially those who already knew what it meant.

Karen and Jerry sat in the sunlight chatting. Karen would check the dials on the machines, and monitor the equipment for changes. If a substantial quake occurred, she'd let them know. If Jerry didn't occupy her mind too much.

The archeology students a few feet away examined the dark patch of earth. They squealed with delight at whatever the find the signified. One pulled out a phone to save a voice file of time, location, and potential composition.

Archeology might be exciting, and it played along with seismology. Today, though, Amber wanted to focus on finding a fault line that would give her status at the research center for her summer paid internship. Not another arrowhead to add to the thousands already in the museum.

Brandon was Karen's dad, and her mother's significant other, wanted to listen to what she knew about the rocks and the visible fault lines.

A stick knocked down by the high school teens made a good pointer. She explained what each change in the rocks meant.

"This swirl may have been caused by the 1906 San Andrea's quake."

Amber's mom walked up and listened to her explaining to Brandon what she saw in the quake record.

"Do you remember what happened after that?" Her mom asked.

"Sure do. The town burned to the ground from a fractured water supply system."

Brandon hadn't been making comments as he usually did when he encouraged her, or Karen, to relate the rock's stories. He should have picked up on that exaggeration.

Brandon glanced to Jerry and Karen, and back to her. "You think he's okay?"

Amber rubbed her toe in the dirt. If she were completely honest, Karen would be in big trouble, and so would she. Then again, she didn't know anything for sure. Suspicions of what went on behind closed doors on some of his visits when their parents worked late at the lab, yeah. Facts, no. "He's okay, I guess. Typical teen male. No

interest in science."

"That's what I'm worried about," Brandon said.

"Actually, the type of science he's interested in, is what we worry about." Her mom gave her a hug.

Amber's face turned red.

"Let's go interrupt them, shall we?" Her mom wrapped her arm around Amber's shoulder and led her to the center of the field.

Karen glanced up from monitoring the equipment.

Jerry tried to pull her away.

"Dad, you had a call."

Brandon grabbed his phone next to the seismometer.

"Activity is up again. Several small quakes locally; and an unusual pattern across the country."

"More data like the last few weeks?" Amber's mom asked.

Brandon closed his phone and picked up his pack. "They need us at the lab, now. The patterns forming are not a good sign. Come on girls, we better leave the archeology team to their work."

Jerry groaned. "My friends'll be back in five minutes. Can you stay that much longer?"

"No." Brandon said. "Come on Karen."

"You'll be at the dance, right?" Jerry called.

Brandon walked on up the trail and ignored Jerry.

Karen nodded to Jerry behind her father's back.

Amber picked up her backpack.

As they left the clearing, Jerry's friends clambered down the embankment near them. "Scared of a little quake? We can make the ground shake for you."

Amber shivered. Home would be far safer than in the woods with these characters. A few more weeks of school, and she'd be done with them, and those teachers who didn't know as much about the region's quake history as she did, forever.

Brandon drove directly to her and her mom's home. "Girls, go inside. We have work to do. We'll be home late tonight."

"What about the dance?" Karen asked.

Yeah right, like Brandon would let her go with Jerry now?

"Let her go. It's within walking distance, and Amber won't let anything happen." Amber's mom said.

Amber knew she'd try not to let anything happen. Karen was her best friend and should be by her side, not beside some guy. Of course, Jerry had said he'd find someone to dance with her. Hopefully, not some stinky ball player, fresh from that kind of field.

Brandon sighed. "Okay. Call me when you reach the school, and when you make it home, only the two of you. Understood?"

"Yes," Karen said.

"Sure thing. Thanks mom!" Amber closed the car door and ran to the house.

If their parents were going to work, so were they. They'd have to research from home, and quickly, before the dance.

"We have two hours." Karen locked the door.

Amber flipped on the TV to national news. She powered up the computer terminals.

Karen watched the television for a few minutes while the computers hummed to start screens.

"Any news?" Amber asked as she logged into the site her mom would send updates too.

"Nothing. Are they up?"

"Yes. Use my homework computer. I'll use my gaming computer."

"As if you ever played games on it," Karen said.

"Sure do. I play games that let me build my own solar system, or repair the earth after super earthquakes." Amber scanned her email for any important news.

Karen laughed as she sat down. A startled gasp came from her.

Amber turned to Karen's screen. The reporting site their parents worked for buzzed with activity. The stream logged real time comments and events, and neither of them could keep up with the lines of comments as they flew down the screen.

The comments slowed down.

The line blinked, waiting on the next report.

Karen sighed and leaned back. "If the event is over, I guess we wait. They'll be hours putting the pieces together. The epicenter couldn't have been too close, or too strong. We would have felt something if it had been. We'll have to fix dinner."

Amber clicked her keyboard. "You can order a pizza. I'm going to analyze the data."

She turned back to her own screen and pulled up the same site. She opened another window and pulled up a site her mom showed her the night before. California wasn't the only place with unusual readings right now. The scientists hadn't pinpointed where the other readings originated, or at least not as of last night.

Columns scrolled down the screen. Similarities between the earthquake and data in California and other regions of the country

grabbed her attention. The pieces of the puzzle began to take shape. Danger lurked deep underground in several places, and may have been overlooked by people focusing only on their local area. Brandon had hinted at the idea.

Amber grabbed her phone and turned the speaker on as she dialed her mom.

"What, Amber? You should have texted. We have a lot of work to do."

"Mom." Amber's voice faltered as her finger pointed at the data.

"Yes?" Her voice lifted as she tapped something in the background.

Her mom sounded both hopeful, and annoyed. Amber gulped and tried again. "Mom, I'm layering the maps from last night. It's not good."

Static sounded in the background as someone interrupted her mom.

The background chatter stopped. "Yes. What do you see? I haven't had time to review yesterday's notes."

"It's important." The last map slid into place. Place names slid over the geological map, and over the recent earthquake data. "The recent earthquakes are centered in New Mexico. The San Andres Northern Mountain Fault may be trying to fracture. They seem to be spreading there as well as here."

Silence on the other end.

Amber couldn't determine if her mom was annoyed, worried, or both.

"Amber, please save that file. Email it to me. Have you seen today's data?"

Amber gulped. "We saw it flying down the screen a minute ago. Karen and I haven't analyzed it yet. Where was it?"

"A tiny slip on the San Andreas. Keep Karen there with you. Have her run home long enough to pack a change of clothes, and return to our house. Keep her there." The phone clicked off.

Karen's face paled. She ran out of the house.

How could this be happening? Tonight I wanted to have fun and dance. Karen planned to dance with Jerry. And, Jerry planned to introduce her to one of his friends, maybe. Why tonight?

A buzz interrupted her thoughts.

It wasn't her phone, or Karen's. She checked both.

The buzz sounded again.

Pizza delivery was at the door.

She laughed as she searched for money. He probably thought she was crazy answering the door without it.

Chapter 2

Mount Kilauea, Hawaii

Unsteady rivers and streams of lava hardened in its search for the cooling waters of the sea. Soft spots formed, and rocks shifted as Alex slipped and slid across the flow.

Alex stopped on a hardened rock and glanced back. The impressions of his footprints added pressure and soil contamination to alter the lava's composition. Like an ant encased in amber, the soil would remain in the lava until it eroded. His dad published papers on it years ago.

Ahead a car sized, hardened volcanic boulder tilted at an unlikely angle on its journey to the sea. Over the decades since it formed, Kilauea's lava rivers raged around it, tugging it one way, or another. For now, it provided a resting spot in the active lava flows. Alex climbed to its summit until the rest of his dad's graduate student research team caught up.

The team scrambled through the lava flow maze. Half-cooled lava streams, with bits of fresh red lava oozed like pimples on the Earth's surface. When stepped on, they erupted, and let out the boiling liquid, to harden into sharp, tangled shapes.

Alex's pimple-covered cheek itched and stung at the thought. Unconsciously, he reached to scratch them. The pus oozed out, as his skin repaired itself. Lava-splattered gloves would damage his skin more. Later, he'd clean them out good. For now, he let his hand slide back down to his side.

"Alex." His dad caught up. "You shouldn't go so far ahead of us. Please slow down while we collect samples."

"Sure Dad." Alex grinned. "I'll wait, and move slow. Possibly being trapped by lava as it breaks through, rather than skimming over it."

His dad groaned as he sat down to rest a moment.

The graduate students fluttered around on the lava, taking pictures and samples to study back in the lab. One of the last field trips of the semester, most were steady on their feet as they scrambled about the field.

Alex had walked on this field all his life. Every visit with his dad

and the students there were massive changes. When he tripped to avoid a lava bubble burst by a new student on her first excursion, it had sent him reeling back onto the scalpel sharp lava, leaving a jagged ridged scar. That had been twelve years ago.

He glanced down and verified his heavy pants were tucked well into his splattered heat resistant boots. A sharp splinter wouldn't sneak between his boot tops and pants today. He kept the broken tip they had pulled from his leg in his wallet. Any trip he went on he carried it for good luck to appease the Goddess Pele.

Lava, the embodiment of Goddess Pele, flowed steadily, as it had for years. Small quakes, unfelt by the casual observer prevented the furnace deep inside from skimming over and plugging closed. Each new flow added life and land to island. As long as the flow was steady, the volcano wouldn't erupt dangerously like so many others did. Unexpectedly killing plants, animals, and humans.

His dad meant well and wanted to keep him safe. Dad was all the family he had left. Better cheer him up by encouraging a story he knew well.

"Dad, how far are we from Loihi?"

The lava bubbled at their feet as the students came closer. Some gathered nearer the sea, a hundred yards away. Others rambled further inland, close to where the remains of a road were baked and transformed as lava flowed over and under it.

His dad shifted. "Less than ten miles from shore, and nigh three thousand feet under the surface. A blink geologically before Loihi's lava flow allows it to rise to the surface. Many human generations before it will surface. Someday, it'll rise, and seabirds will rest there. People will be able to see it from here. Maybe almost swim there, if Kilauea erupts long enough."

His dad's graduate students chattered as they clambered to a stop below the boulder. Insulated backpacks bulged with lava collected in tiny jars. Several stopped to rest and drink from water bottles carefully stored away from the collections. Tom measured the temperature in one nearby fresh split.

Alex shifted his own backpack and lifted his collecting tool. "I want to collect a few samples myself. My project is to compare Kilauea's lava that erupts on land, which later hardens in the sea, with Loihi's lava that both erupts and hardens in the sea. I know you've done the experiment before."

"Careful son." His dad reached out. His hand dropped to his knees, and his eyes focused on the ground. "You aren't a graduate

student yet. You don't have to take samples and run experiments."

The strained look in his dad's face meant memories of his mom, and how she died flooded the present. Mom had been his dad's partner as wife, explorer, scientist, interpreter, and recorder. Collecting volcanic gas readings last summer at Mt. Etna a quivering quake had unbalanced dad. She managed to prevent his fall; and in doing so, had fallen to her own death.

Dad had returned a shaken, broken shell, afraid to do the work he had spent a lifetime on. A serious limp had kept him out of the field one semester. Alex had led the class fieldwork then. Even now, Dad tottered behind him, unable to keep up. Whether fear or health prevented his normal push through the flows, Alex couldn't decide. The doctors said he was fine. Of course, how many of them had traipsed across the flows?

"Tom, when was the last quake?" Alex yelled to one of the graduate students, also his best friend since childhood.

Tom checked his phone. "Three hours ago, a 2.0. Should be safe for a while."

Alex glanced back at his dad. "I'll tie a rope around my waist. Tom can spot me, so I don't fall in. The waves aren't bad here."

His dad waved him on, with a wistful look on his face.

Alex slipped and slid through the loosened lava flow to the ocean's edge. A nearby spot would be easy to step into the water. A few streams trickled all the way to the sea here.

Tom placed his backpack on the boulder. He followed Alex down the trail, disturbing as little of the lava flow as possible.

A few feet from the ocean's rocky edge, Alex tied the rope around his waist. Here the lava had hardened several times as the streams shifted, always following the flow of least resistance. The edges were jagged and dangerous. A slip here could mean serious blood loss. No wonder the natives had used obsidian arrow points for generations before Europeans arrived.

Alex glanced down. His legs were still protected. A deep breath, and a moment later, he passed the line to Tom.

Tom stood ready to brace against the larger rocks if needed.

Alex visually checked the lava flow again. Eyes weren't enough here. If the cliffs were lower here, he could reach over and collect without climbing down. He'd have to slip down the embankment into the ocean. By climbing into the ocean, he could have his pick of stream exits to sample and experiment on. The water would lap the top of his boots. If he missed the hardened lava, and opened a fresh

boiling stream too soon, he might land wrong on the jagged ocean floor. This was the lowest spot on the nearby beach.

Alex searched the ground, and the side of the seven-foot cliff with his lava collection tool. A fancy name for a three-foot long metal walking stick with an adjustable cup to collect lava samples.

The rope pulled tight. Tom waited, watching to be sure the jagged edges wouldn't fray the rope sending Alex to the bottom faster than intended.

Alex sat down and grasped the side of the cliff, to slide over the edge. His feet skidded across the moist rocky surface. Holding the edge, he slipped over, his feet finding the way his tool had shown by memory. He scaled down, no visible damage to the rope. His feet reached the ocean floor. Or what passed for ocean floor here.

Lava flowed openly from a vent nearby directly into the ocean, bubbling and hissing as it cascading into the cooler waters. This batch would make one good sample. He filled the cup, chalked a note on it, and stuck it in his insulated backpack.

A wave sloshed.

Steam billowed in his face.

His hands reached for the cliff to maintain his balance.

Lava that had never been exposed to air bubbled up through the remnants of former land based lava to form pillow lava.

Alex attached a second cup to his collection tool. Maintaining his footing was critical. To step in a pillow lava bubble as it burst could be deadly. A step forward and he reached below the surface of the ocean with nothing to steady himself.

Sample obtained, he stepped back. A look out to sea, he could imagine what Loihi would look like from here one day. Its mound slowly rising, invisible, deep under the waves. He stepped forward into the waves that splashed his heavy-duty boots. His collection pole steadied him against the current. The ground shifted and the waves lapped gently in the breeze.

The ground beneath him shivered slightly. Streams shifted around him. Most people would never notice. Walking on the edge of a volcano, his life depended on his paying attention to tiny details of the ever-changing crust.

"Alex, that was likely a 2.3," his dad shouted.

Alex nodded and turned around. His collection tool tested for firm areas to step. Lava shifted its flow after even a tiny quake. The climb back up the cliff didn't take long with Tom keeping the rope taunt.

Tom waited until he was a safe distance from the water to toss

the rope back to him.

Alex dropped the collection cup to the middle hook, and used it to walk back to where the rest of the team was. His dad had evaluated the data of lava gathered from Loihi years before, and again last month. Now, Alex would compile and compare his data with ongoing research to determine what changes, if any, had formed in the Kilauea rock based on where it erupted and hardened.

Alex helped his dad walk back to the van. Stumbling over rocks he knew well was not a good sign. His dad barely lifted his head enough to see more than directly below him.

"Professor, tell us a story about one of your travels," Tom said from a few feet away.

His dad grabbed hold of his collection tool and stared off into space a moment. He nodded and launched into the story of an early trip to a volcano in South America before he met Alex's mom.

Tom and a few students listened closely as they hiked the trail back to the vans. Other students talked amongst themselves, ignoring the story. His father continued the story on the drive back to campus. He reached the part where the volcano vomited baseball sized chunks into the air as he parked carefully to avoid dumping the collection containers.

Tom waited for Alex.

All the other students would hurry to the lab room, leaving no open stations for them to work together. Alex's samples would have to wait until later to be tested. As a second year college student, he had no right to graduate lab space, or time, since he wasn't officially in his dad's class.

Tom's mom, a professor in the anthropology department, had given them access to her lab room as well. They could work undisturbed while her students were in the field.

Alex dropped the backpack down and sat his cooling lava samples on a teetering pile of papers. The mess on the lab tables indicated several simultaneous projects. Science was a messy business, and even with the clutter, this was home, surrounded by paper and equipment.

Plenty of evaluation equipment at his disposal without having to wait, as long as his didn't lose his notes in the mess. No coworkers meant no one to bounce questions, or ideas off of, either. Tom would work in here too, to keep him company. It wasn't the same as a whole class full of ideas and thoughts. Alex was used to theorizing on his own. He dreamed of sharing opinions with others to catch

flaws in his own work.

Obtaining a full chemical analysis on the sample he collected would take several days. Alex pulled out the printout from last month's Loihi expedition. A scuba diving professor had taken a few graduate students with him for that trip. First time his dad had missed an underwater excursion. This report would give him something to compare to.

Tom turned on lights and machines to begin the experiments. It would be a long, quiet afternoon.

Alex cleared a space and set up the first few samples, labeling them with a marker and some string strung across the floor.

Sounds of classic country music flooded the room. Tom grinned sheepishly as he pulled out his phone.

Alex tried not to listen to Tom's short conversation.

"Alex," Tom said. "Your dad is looking for us. Some news he wants us to see. Guess your phone is off?"

Alex sighed. "It's on the charger. Can we leave everything here?"

"Should be able to. I'll tell mom it's here. Maybe Shelly will come in and finish for you."

Alex grinned. "Hope not."

Shelly tried to take over his projects, while ignoring him. Though, why she studied anthropology, when she wanted to be a volcanologist, was beyond him.

Alex sighed and sat the experiment notes under the equipment so they would be distinguishable to Tom's mom and her students.

They hurried to his dad's lab.

At the door, his dad tapped his foot, and held a paper. Noise and laughter billowed from the lab room behind him.

"Professor!" The words echoed from the room.

His dad handed Alex the page, and answered the student's question.

Alex took the sheet.

The notice covered a 4.5 earthquake in New Mexico.

A 4.5 would do some damage, to weakly built structures. Then he noticed the location, San Andres Northern Mountain Fault. White Sands, the nuclear testing grounds, contained this fault. Below was a list of more quakes, some larger, some smaller that had clustered in the same area over the last two days. The page slipped through his fingers. "They weren't testing were they?"

"No. Thankfully, nothing was being tested. There have been an unusual series of earthquakes in the general area the last few

weeks." His dad shifted as he stood. Standing still too long took a painful toll.

Alex glanced back at the page. The San Andreas Fault in California had also slipped slightly. Many small quakes were clustered there as well. A starred note at the bottom lumped clusters occurring around the globe in an unusual steady stream. None sounded serious in the larger scheme of things, kinda like the quakes on Kilauea. Alex's neck prickled. He looked up at his dad.

"Son, the dormant volcano, Sierra Blanca is showing signs of a new bulge. There is also a recent uprising under parts of the Carrizozo Malpais lava flows."

Alex's hand dropped to his side, as his eyes closed. Earthquakes could trigger volcanoes, or volcanoes could trigger earthquakes. In some cases, they happened to occur together. "That's not good news. I thought the hot spots had shifted away from there."

His dad placed his hands on his shoulders. "That's what everyone thought. The volcano here is relatively stable. The semester will end in a month, then I could prepare to go. They need someone now. You are young, and you know almost as much as I do."

Alex gulped. "Thanks dad."

"I'm sending you and Tom, with all the data and equipment we can spare. We need you both. You're young, strong, and smart. You've absorbed plenty, and can call for assistance anytime." His dad stared into the lab room as he spoke.

Alex was surprised. The island had been his home longer than he could remember. Even vacations had been with both parents to nearby islands, never to the mainland.

His dad stepped back. "At the first sign of trouble, I want you to call, and come home, immediately. I don't want to lose either of you. The government wants to be sure trouble isn't brewing in the next few weeks."

Being at the cutting edge of science, it was Alex's chance to make a name for himself. The hallway spun.

His dad reached out to steady him. "I wish I could go. Guess it's your turn now."

"When do we leave?"

"Go home and pack. Be back in an hour. Your plane leaves in two. It will take your strength to help carry all the equipment. I can't do it anymore." His feet shuffled down the hallway with a tear in the corner of his eye. He paused to rest his knee, and limped back into

the lab of excited graduate students. "I need," his dad's voice trailed off as several students nosily jumped to help collect equipment.

"Alex?" Tom whispered, placing his hand on Alex's shoulder. "I'll drive. We can both grab our stuff in no time." Tom called his mom as he fumbled for his keys.

Alex couldn't speak. Book knowledge, and the knowledge of Hawaii volcanoes, he had plenty of. Real field knowledge, he didn't have. Thoughts and emotions, unrecognizable, fluttered through his brain as he followed his friend down the hall.

Going to the mainland wouldn't be a pleasure hike across the islands. He grabbed shorts for the New Mexico summer sun, as well as another lava stained pair of pants. A picture of his mom and dad with him on Mauna Loa five years ago landed atop the pile of assorted clothes.

"Ready?" Tom hollered up the stairs.

Alex gulped as he looked around the room. The only home he had known. Somehow, it didn't look the same; as if he were seeing it for the first time. It was the same as this morning, except for the bag on the bed.

"Sure," he said. "Be right there."

Curtains billowed in the breeze.

A chill spiraled up his spine. Alex grabbed his phone and charger, shoving them in his pocket. He picked up his bag and hurried down the stairs.

Chapter 3

Parkfield, California

"Amber! Karen!"

The sound broke through the depths of sleep. A distant light flickered on.

"Wake up! Where are you?"

Amber rubbed her eyes. She wasn't in bed, or on the couch. Her eyes flittered open. The sleeping bag rustled with her movement. A light blinked on the hardwood floor. Her computer screen flickered not far away. She tried to sit up.

The light from the kitchen shone eerily into the living room.

Karen had crashed on the couch after helping crunch the numbers coming in from the field.

"Mom, I'm here." Amber yawned and stretched.

"Where's Karen?"

Karen groaned from a few feet away. "Sleepy."

"Hurry girls. We took a short nap at the research station. Go pack. We are leaving for New Mexico in an hour."

"How bad is it?" Amber sat up and unzipped the sleeping bag.

"They had a 4.5. Instability, and pressure is rising. They want us there as soon as possible. We'll need your help analyzing the data."

With quake clusters at home in California, New Mexico, and several other places around the world, it was no surprise top scientists like her mom and Brandon were being called to investigate. Excitement urged her awake and up the stairs.

The clock read 11:30pm. There wasn't enough time to search for clothes she might want. Stashed inside the closet door was a bag packed for an upcoming weekend hiking trip, to explore a new section of a little known fault. She grabbed a few last minute things she might need, and tossed them in on top of her "Ring of Fire" pillowcase. Slinging the bag over her shoulder, she ran for the stairs.

"We'll be there in an hour," Amber's mom said into her phone.

Amber slipped down the stairs and slid across the floor to her shoes by the couch.

Karen sat nearby, waiting on her dad. "I don't want to go. The quakes might become worse."

"Karen, you need to come. Who will I talk with while mom works?" Amber pulled her shoes on.

Karen pulled the pillow tight to her chest. She glanced at Amber pleading, "Please. Someone has to stay and watch the houses. Taffy is due to have kittens any day now."

The pillow slid down to her lap. "What about school? I can email assignments and notes to you."

"Oh no, the science test Monday, it's almost half our grade." Amber's shoulders slumped. "Mom, this trip is a chance in a lifetime! Maybe Karen can set it up so you can watch me take the test online?"

Amber's mom nodded. "Karen, you've never stayed alone before."

"Please?" Karen begged.

"It's short notice, they might not set it up." Amber's mom looked at them both.

Brandon walked in the front door carrying his suitcase and an extra bag. "Karen, I brought some clothes for you."

Karen groaned and grabbed Amber's arm.

Amber's mom eyes brightened when Brandon walked in the room. Someday, they would marry, if Amber's dad never returned. Brandon was a nice person, as well as the father of her best friend.

"Mom, please." Amber said. "Karen needs to stay here for Taffy, and I can go with you. You won't have time to cancel the mail, or utilities. You've no idea how long we might be gone. Karen can come out later."

Her mom sighed, and rubbed her forehead. "Brandon, I know we don't want to leave either of the girls behind. Karen wants to stay for school and Taffy."

Brandon dropped his bag on a chair. "Karen, please. Not now."

"Please dad. Someone has to keep our homes safe. I can take care of everything. Most teens our age are preparing to live on their own in a few weeks anyway. Think of it as a trial run. It's safer here than there right now, they have nuclear weapons." Karen begged with her fists under her chin.

Brandon sighed. "If you insist. Keep the doors locked when you are in either house. Be safe. Go to school, and come straight home. Keep in contact as much as you can." He walked up to his daughter and placed his hands on her shoulders.

"Don't you run off now. Be careful." He hugged her close.

Tears in her eyes, she nodded. She picked up her bag from

earlier in the evening. "You better be going. You have a plane to catch. I'll stay here until morning. Call me when you arrive." She ran to Amber and hugged her.

Karen pulled out a picture as she followed them out the door. It had to be of Jerry. Karen couldn't leave him behind. She loved him. And wouldn't dare risk her life, and their future together.

Amber waved as the car pulled away.

Karen waved back. The light from the open door shimmered behind her.

At the local private airport, her mom and Brandon showed their personal, and seismologist identification.

The clerk pointed toward the smaller waiting area. "The plane you are waiting on will be here in a few minutes. Coffee is available if you want."

Amber wandered over to the viewing area. The dust-covered windows were streaked with an oily shimmer causing moving lights to dance in unexpected patterns. Her finger traced the lines, as many others obviously had. Straight lines, that only broke across fingerprints.

Her mom and Brandon went to the coffee pot. Their whispered conversation lulled Amber into a dream like trance.

The night sky fascinated her. Landing lights at the main airport, a few miles away blinked on and off in the night, as planes landed and departed. It amazed her how the pilots could maneuver, and remember what each type and color of light meant. Piloting in daylight could be even more difficult at times, without the lights to guide and direct, in foggy, windy, or rainy conditions. Trying to line up a jet with a runway in the fog, or a thunderstorm, took a skilled pilot with plenty of support from their team. She'd seen examples on TV, and in their travels, of jets trying to land on quake ridden runways. Not a pretty picture.

"Amber do you see anything?"

"Not yet." Amber pulled her hand away from the window and sat in a nearby chair. She rested her backpack on the floor between her legs. Everything she owned that mattered was with her.

Everything except Karen.

Karen had chosen Jerry over her.

The wall window glowed and flickered as lights outside crossed it and travelled on their way into the distance. Jets ascended and descended at the larger airport. One set of lights turned in their direction, and didn't change course. "Lights are coming. They seem

closer than the others."

"That's them," the clerk said. "You should be able to go out in a few minutes. You might want to use the restrooms before you go. Not sure if they'll take the time to refuel."

Amber followed her mom into the tiny women's room. The dim overhead light yellowed the walls, and hid dirt. Lack of light couldn't hide the stale odor of a place as old as her and her mom together.

Amber held her nose, and kept her backpack off the floor.

"Hurry." Her mom washed her hands and held the door open.

Amber pulled her bag closer and followed her mom and Brandon down the hallway.

A guard opened the door to the tarmac.

Another guard escorted them to a small plane.

The internal staircase rolled out of the running plane.

Amber took a deep breath. Once inside the plane, she let out the last Californian air she would breathe for some time.

Two young men reclined in the front seats. She walked back behind them; far enough to let her mom and Brandon talk privately to these other scientists. After all, she was merely along to help organize the data they found.

She pulled out her phone to turn it off for takeoff. No messages from Karen. Normally, Karen would have texted her. She wouldn't cry that her best friend had abandoned her for a boyfriend. Brandon and her mom had no idea how close Jerry and Karen were. If they knew, they'd never have allowed her to stay behind.

Amber ignored the murmur of voices as her mom and Brandon spoke to the two young men.

The plane rolled forward. The movement pushed her backwards against her seat.

She closed her eyes until the plane leveled out, and the jarring awareness of speeding through the air stopped. The clouds slipped by. The physics of flying was one science she would never comprehend. Earthquakes, and their aftermath, were easy to grasp.

"Amber come sit up here so we can discuss what information we have so far." Amber's mom said.

To stand and walk required balance beam skills, something Amber hadn't mastered. The seats swayed side to side as she stepped. She toddled forward unsteadily, and plopped down behind Brandon, who was on the aisle next to the two strangers.

"Hi Amber. I'm Alex, and this is Tom. What do you bring to the project?"

"I'm along to help mom and Brandon. I watch, dig, and crunch the numbers."

Amber's mom laughed. "Don't be so modest. You know almost as much as we do, and you can compute the information quicker."

"Relax Amber," Tom said. "We aren't that much older than you. Do you want to work with us at the volcano fields?"

"I haven't been to one in a few years. I study earthquakes, and how they affect the environment." Amber glanced from one to the other.

"Plenty of quakes occur near volcanoes. Maybe you tell us whether any we recognize are faults, or volcano growth?" Tom said.

Amber blushed.

"Your mom seems impressed by your map overlay skills," Alex said.

Amber closed her eyes and remembered the map, as easily as her embroidered pillowcase. "Creating it in my mind is easy. I know how to use the technology to make it visible for others."

Alex and Tom looked at each other.

"We need that on our team too," Tom said. "It's up to your mom."

"Well," Brandon said, "I think we'll see what new information they have for us on the ground when we arrive."

He reached over to pat Amber's shoulder and chuckled. "Wouldn't want Amber to feel torn between her family, and new friends."

Amber hid her face. She wasn't sure if they were friends yet. Alex and Tom might be nice; she'd have to give it time. The seat leaned back comfortably. A nap would prepare her for the coming day.

Alex and Tom discussed the latest reports that mom and Brandon had brought them. Apparently, Hawaii was experiencing stronger clusters than usual as well.

If they needed her, they'd wake her. Questions required rest to answer. She turned to one side and closed her eyes.

Chapter 4

Carrizozo, New Mexico, The Valley of Fires State Park

The rumble of the plane changed. Amber woke to light shining in on her face.

She stretched and woke her mom. "Mom, we're almost there."

Her mom grumbled and reached for Brandon's hand.

The descent was even more jarring than the ascent.

At last, her stomach quieted.

With the plane on the ground, Amber could breathe deeply again.

She checked her phone. Still no messages from Karen.

The group exited the plane.

Amber followed behind missing a friend to joke and laugh with while their parents did the serious business of science research.

An airline employee pulled a cart loaded with seismometers, and other equipment Amber didn't quite recognize. The volcanologist's equipment would be specialized, and different from what she had assisted her mom with.

Amber waited and checked her phone again while the equipment was loaded into the van.

"Landed safe," she texted to Karen. Before when she had traveled with her mom, she'd have a dozen texts from Karen by the time she landed.

After all five people settled into the van's seats, the driver turned to the group. "Hi, I'm Corbo. I'm taking you to The Valley of Fires State Park. There, you will meet with Dr. Rebecca Sage from the New Mexico Tech Seismographic Observatory." He turned the key, and the van lurched to a start.

Amber smiled. Dr. Rebecca was well known in the field, and had visited the Parkfield site a few times to work with her mom and Brandon. Her papers had ignited Amber's dreams of finding a better way to predict quakes and their potential damage. Dr. Rebecca might remember her from a visit a few years ago. Of course, she didn't look, or even talk the same.

The change of scenery was refreshing. Amber clutched the

window frame. Airplanes were too stifling to enjoy the panoramic view.

The quakes in New Mexico had been low magnitude so far. Damage wasn't visible from a moving vehicle. Or, at least to someone who had never seen the area before.

The State Park entrance loomed ahead.

Corbo parked the van in front of a mobile home. The wheels and towing rig still attached. Truck tracks pooled with water back to the main trail. Shrubs and grass flattened and pushed back from the weight of the truck cab. Water and electric hook up lines snaked from the back end of the trailer, out of sight into the grass.

The work trailer reminded her of the one her mom often used in Parkfield. Or, the one where they stayed off the Hayward Fault for a few days over spring break.

During the spring break trip, she and Karen laughed, giggled, and explored the fault, pointing out fractures and signs of movement to their parents. Karen was almost an extension of herself. Amber would have no one to share stories with around a campfire, or as they drifted off to sleep. Amber was alone with her mom, Brandon, and two young men she didn't know.

Sometimes their parents were tense as they read the data and tried to organize it with known data points. Karen was always the first to recognize too much tension and break it up with a joke.

Dr. Rebecca opened the door to the work trailer. Her face was lined, and pale, more withdrawn than Amber remembered. She spent too much time at her computer crunching data, and not enough out in the field collecting the updates. Her students did most of the fieldwork, leaving her to teach them how to interpret it when they returned.

Amber grabbed her bag, and hurried up to Dr. Rebecca.

"Hi everyone. Hi Amber," She patted Amber's brown curls. "Please, call me Rebecca. We won't have time, or energy, for social complexities. Come on in."

Dr. Rebecca treated Amber like the child she was years ago. It stung almost as much as Karen's abandonment. She held her head high, and tried not to sniffle. Thankfully, her mom said she would be a great asset for the team, not only someone to watch out for. Hard work, finding answers, and being responsible for her equipment should change her opinion. After all, this summer, she would join the Parkfield team as a paid assistant. Or maybe, she was one now, she'd have to ask later.

Dr. Rebecca led them inside.

The well-equipped trailer would be their base, and could be moved anywhere a truck could go if needed. Six computers with blinking screens waited on desks bolted to the floor. Chairs pushed under in a clear walkway, at the moment. A kitchenette nestled off to the side, with a pot of coffee already brewed. The comforting aroma pulled Amber to the small fridge.

Dr. Rebecca helped Alex and Tom carry in equipment. "We keep the furniture bolted to the floor, so it's ready for the earthquakes, and whenever we need to move it to a new study spot in various fields. The students work in the trenches, while I teach them how to analyze the data in here."

She pushed an office chair out of the walkway. "Be sure and lock the chairs into position when not using them. We have another trailer coming, to be placed behind here, for sleeping accommodations. If anyone takes the time."

Amber grabbed a caffeine free soda, and rejoined the group. She dropped her bag next to one computer, smaller than the rest.

Dr. Rebecca glanced up from shuffling papers on the snack bar. "No Amber, that one's for me. You need the biggest monitor in the back row over there. Lots of memory, and the ability to view multiple projects at once will help us all. Your mom and Brandon will be beside me, and Tom and Alex will be on either side of you. They have of plenty of programs set up as well. I figure you will want access to both your mom's data, and theirs. We need you to combine it all and help us determine the full picture."

"That'll be fun. I enjoy helping in any way I can." Amber laughed as she pushed the hair out of her eyes. It was easy to show her knowledge in front of Karen, the others at school, or even her mom. In front of scientists she didn't know, her heart quaked. She was used to the scientists at Parkfield. One more practice for the real world she hoped to join in a few weeks.

Dr. Rebecca stretched her hand out, as if she wanted to pat Amber's shoulder. "Sure dear, like you helped your mom the other day. We need your technological expertise to combine everything. We've all been focusing on one place to long. We might miss a variable that the two young men may share with you easier than we might hear it. After all, combing volcanic and seismology data requires creativity."

Amber blushed. Creativity wasn't exactly her strong spot. She clarified and cleaned up the efforts of others, pointing out things they

neglected to mention.

Alex took the chair on right side, and Tom her left.

The computer flashed in front of her. A printed list of programs and passwords had been provided for each of them. Amber checked into the station her mom and Brandon worked for. Nothing relevant was instantly visible on the earthquake sites. "Alex?"

"Hmm?"

She opened the volcano site on her list. "What am I looking for?"

He reached over and gave her a few pointers. The volcano sites presented much of the same basic information, in a slightly different format, and focused on different specifics. A few minutes passed as she compared the new site with the ones she regularly used. Although activity was certainly increased, its level and intensity was nearly within the normal, or expected range.

A bang rocked the trailer. Glass rattled in the kitchen and windows.

"Hope it was the sleeping trailer," her mom said.

"Definitely," Tom said.

"Nope." Amber clicked back to the earthquake sites. "That was a likely 4.5 not far from here. Probably in the San Andres again."

A light thump sounded.

Dr. Rebecca glanced out the window. "That is home sweet home away from home. Let's give the numbers a few minutes to digest, and go pick rooms. We may not have time later, and we have field work to do."

Amber swiveled the chair around. "Alex, any changes on the volcano site?"

"Nope. Kinda glad at the moment." He reached to grab her bag as well as his.

"No thanks. I can do it myself." She jerked it out of his hands, heart thumping. The zipper opened, and her "Ring of Fire" pillowcase spilled out the top.

He shrugged. "If we are here, we can help."

Amber smiled back. "No offense. How would I keep my strength up to do my job, if someone else did the lifting for me?" She hurried after Dr. Rebecca.

Choosing her room was easy. Since she was alone, she chose the smallest. Amber took a moment to make the cozy room homey. She threw her bag on the bed, and pulled out her "Ring of Fire" pillowcase. The fading lines her grandmother had cross-stitched begged to be touched. When the tiny x's had begun to pull out,

Amber turned it into a relic. It waited for her on her pillow when she came home, no matter where home was. A reminder, of who she was, where she had been. Her hand rested gently on it, smoothing out the lumps.

"How appropriate." Dr. Rebecca stood in the door.

"It makes anywhere home. Glad to be here, with you. I hope to learn a lot." Amber's hand rested on the pillowcase.

Dr. Rebecca smiled. "You will, and so will we. Meeting in five minutes." She hurried on down the hall.

Alex and Tom talked in the small room next door. Any conversation could be heard by everyone though the paper-thin walls.

Holes dotted the bare room walls, like a giant connect the dots puzzle waiting to be completed. Whoever had used this room before hadn't left anything behind. All her geology maps, and a horse poster, had been left in Karen's care. Empty walls shouldn't matter. At night, she'd be too tired to look at pictures anyway. She strolled back to the computer room in the main trailer.

Her mom and Brandon sat down with their coffee, and glanced at her as she stepped into the room.

"Hey Amber, hear from Karen yet?"

She shook her head.

Alex and Tom sifted through their equipment.

Dr. Rebecca paced, nervousness showing in the lines in her face as well as her inability to sit still.

Amber checked the status update on her computer. The quake data poured in as places further away reported the shaking they had felt. The epicenter would be pinpointed soon, if not already.

Her phone was silent. No messages, no calls.

The door opened, and Corbo walked in. "Hi. Sorry I'm late. Phone call." He sat on a chair off to the side.

Dr. Rebecca began, "Okay, we are all here to work together. In order to do so, we will work in smaller groups, and bring our information together. We need to know, is an eruption imminent, and will it be quake, or volcanic in nature? Corbo will be our primary van driver. Alex, you, and Tom need the van for your monitoring equipment, correct?"

Alex slipped the cover over some equipment. "We will need help tomorrow, or maybe today. We have equipment to set up, and need a vehicle to move it closer to the data collection sites. If Amber wants to come with us, she is welcome to."

Amber blushed, and almost said no. Supposedly dormant volcanoes would be fun and exciting to learn more about. Trying to piece the up to date information with her mom and Brandon's study of the faults would be an asset to the team. "Sure. If you don't bite."

"Only if you do first." Tom laughed.

"Okay." Dr Rebecca said. "If Claire and Brandon agree, and you three work without flirting too much, it would be a great idea. We should meet back here, and stay in contact by phone, though phone service is spotty at times. I'll take my car for the three of us today. We'll be going to White Sands National Monument. Lots to see and do. Grab a few last notes, and let's all begin."

Amber shook hands with Brandon and hugged her mom. Her mom hugged her tight. "I'll be fine mom. They seem okay. Good luck today!"

"I wish Karen had come," Brandon said.

"I'm glad she didn't. It's too quiet here." Amber raced back to grab her supplies for hiking. Her pillowcase nestled on the pillow. Her fingers slid across it, and almost left it. She grabbed it. No matter that they were supposed to be back tonight; whenever hiking in strange country, always be prepared.

The door slammed shut behind her as she raced to the van.

Chapter 5

Carrizozo, New Mexico, The Valley of Fires State Park and Sierra Blanca

Amber checked her phone for a message from Karen.

Nothing. Karen wouldn't be beside her to watch the numbers typed into the computer. Sometimes, they reversed themselves and her answers didn't match expectations. Karen always found the mistake and pointed it out.

Amber climbed into the van and slid into the middle seat. Backpack between her knees, she wrapped the phone in her pillowcase and zipped it shut.

Alex rustled the map as he opened it.

"Where are we going today?" Corbo started the van.

Alex rotated the paper map in his hands. "Let me find Valley of the Fires."

He paused a moment as Corbo drove to the park gates.

"We need to go to Sierra Blanca first. It's further away. Then, tomorrow, we may have to hike through the Carrizozo Malpais fields to decide where best to place the other equipment." Alex folded the map up into a wrinkled square. "Of course, as new readings come in, and things change, we may have to move the monitoring equipment."

Amber reached over, grabbed the map, and refolded it neat and square. She slipped it into her backpack under her phone. "I'll keep the map. Wish I had printed up to date geological maps of the area."

"We can do that tonight, or maybe Dr. Rebecca has one we can carry with us. We really didn't have time before we left," Alex said.

Corbo drove southeast from the park towards Sierra Blanca.

Amber observed the scenery along the way. Two days ago, she had watched a documentary about The Great Inland Seaway, which had once submerged this area. She recognized a few rock formations that resembled the ancient coastlines, from the show's maps estimating the shores of thousands of years ago. If the faults continued splitting, it could return, drowning the military base lands. That should take millions of years, based on most current scientific thought. Quakes in the wrong place at the wrong time, could cause

instant change.

She tried to imagine how this desert like landscape would be altered if water permanently returned. It would modify far more than the land. It would change the people too. How, and where they lived, would have to be adjusted. Some alterations would occur instantly. Others might progress for years before reaching a stable point. A house built next year might be underwater in five, or maybe a hundred, depending on rain, and snowfall to the north.

The airport brochure map of the region was a colorful touristy type. Not geologically complete. Dots represented the volcanoes, and volcanic fields. Lines portrayed major known earthquake rifts. The San Andres Fault was in the middle, with a half ring of extinct volcanoes to the east, a large volcanic caldera to the west, and a supervolcano to the north.

"Alex, how much do you know about the interaction of volcanoes and earthquakes?" Amber asked as she glanced up at him.

"Probably as much as you. What are you thinking?"

"The volcano sites, with the major faults splitting several volcanic zones are not a good picture. One strong quake in the wrong place could set off a massive chain reaction." She handed the brochure to Alex.

Alex studied the map. "Dad thinks all the little quakes have caused magma chambers to rebuild in places where everyone thought the hot spots had moved on."

"Are there many?" Amber asked.

"That's what Tom and I came to verify. I hope the equipment that measured the lower magma levels before was malfunctioning, or not strong enough for good readings. If not, there have been massive changes." He drew lines with his fingers on the map.

Alex let out a low whistle. "Dr. Rebecca knows how the faults wrap around the volcanic areas. I wonder what she thinks."

Amber leaned over the map. "She didn't say. I guess she is more worried about the earthquakes at the moment, than the believed extinct volcanoes. Even though there have been a lot of tremors lately, they haven't been strong enough to make national news."

"The government is worried, or they wouldn't have called for all of us to come help Dr. Rebecca." Alex raised his eyebrow.

"White Sands, and so many other places are in danger, to themselves, and to the communities, if the quakes worsen." Amber took the brochure back.

The earthquakes so far, had been low magnitude. Small signs of

earth movement were visible, though most people wouldn't recognize them as such, without special training. Stones had adjusted position, small rock falls under hillsides, and even plants showed signs of geologic stress. The trees on one embankment hung upside down by roots, the leaves beginning to curl.

Corbo pulled into a space at the edge of a hiking trail. "This is as close as we can drive."

Alex opened the back door.

It would be a long haul with the seismometers.

Corbo pulled out a small wagon to carry some of the equipment. "The trail is steep in places. We'll all take turns."

He and Alex loaded the equipment into the wagon.

"I'll pull it first," Amber said.

Everyone carried what they could in their backpacks, and started up the trail.

"How far up?" Corbo asked.

"We need to place the seismometer as close to the peak as possible. This is one sleeping volcano I really look forward to seeing. I haven't seen many extinct volcanoes," Alex said.

"Didn't you travel all over the world studying them?" Amber asked.

"No," Alex shook his head. "Mom and dad went a lot. They left me in charge of the field in Hawaii. I've only actively studied Hawaiian volcanoes."

"Surely, you've studied others." Amber stopped on the trail. This wasn't good. If he only knew a few volcanoes, why had they sent him?

"Oh sure," he turned to her. "Reading, seeing pictures, and even video isn't the same as being there. The noxious, deadly odors of the various gasses are missing. Dried lava beds, some rough as a sponge, others smooth and slippery under your feet. Pictures don't let you see and appreciate the depth, and beauty of what's left of the volcano. The local's tales of their homes being swallowed by lava are all second hand. I couldn't ask the locals questions that mom or dad didn't ask for me. Maybe they would have told me something that my parents missed, or didn't think to ask."

It must have been devastating to stay behind during events as they occurred. And to miss the real life stories, those had always been her favorite part. Even the time the elderly grandmother told of being sixteen and losing her first child in a mudslide caused by an earthquake. "By the time I was four or five, mom and dad took me

on their trips, I reckon."

"Sure. Earthquake studies are different. They have already happened when you explore them. Volcanoes could erupt at any time. Sometimes the extinct ones wake up unexpectedly as well, though fewer people study them."

"Earthquakes repeat too, and there are more warning signs with volcanoes than earthquakes."

"True. Mom and dad might camp out for a month or more. They preferred researching active volcanoes. They couldn't leave the equipment at the top of the volcano to take me to safety. And they wanted to be in the action. That's how mom died. If only she had liked sleeping volcanoes, I might have been able to go along." His head drooped.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know."

Alex's voice quivered as he said, "Dad can't hike anymore. So he sent me. I have all of their knowledge, though not their life experience. And more than many graduate students, except Tom, of course." He stopped for a moment.

Amber reached out to him.

Salsa music blared. Corbo grinned as he answered his phone. "Sure, Livia. We are on the Sierra Blanca Peak. Not sure when we will be back at the camp. Okay, see you later then."

Corbo turned back to everyone. "Sorry about that. My girlfriend, Livia, doesn't like it when I miss a rally. She won't be happy. That's okay though."

"What kind of rally?" Amber asked.

Corbo closed his eyes. "A group of people who gather and talk religious nonsense."

The sky, trees, and nature all around were the only religion Amber needed. There didn't seem any point in talking about it to others.

"How long is the hike, do you think?" Tom said.

"A couple of hours. Maybe longer with this equipment. Amber, you may want to trade off. Don't want to wear your arms out," Corbo said.

"I'll take it," Alex said. He reached for the wagon handle. "Let's rest for a minute, so Tom can take my pack too."

"Wish we had a mule, or even a large dog to pull the wagon," Tom grinned.

"Not a bad idea," Corbo said. "I may be able to find a dog for tomorrow, or whenever we do the lava fields."

"Do you think we need to put a seismometer in the Datil-Mogollon Volcanic Field, or the Aden Lava Flows?" Amber handed Alex's pack to Tom. Though heavy, only her pack would be a break from the loaded wagon jerking her arms on every bump and twig.

Alex pulled the wagon around a stand of young trees in the middle of the path. "I don't have enough equipment with me. We'll check with Dr. Rebecca, and see if she can find some more equipment to set up. Maybe have some of her students place some up there. We need all the help we can find, in a hurry."

Chapter 6

Sierra Blanca, New Mexico

The Sierra Blanca mountain peak loomed ahead. Trees and brushy plants covered this mountain, to locals. A waking, growing volcano in reality. Most noticeable to Alex was the absence of creatures. Ants and bugs crawled in the leaves and across the trail. Nothing larger rustled leaves or twigs. Birds and squirrels had disappeared. Stifling silence met them as they hiked up the slope.

The two-hour hike was in some ways easier, and in others more difficult than Hawaiian volcanoes. There was no breeze to rustle the leaves, or cool the forehead.

Corbo took the wagon after half an hour. He huffed and puffed his way to the front of the line.

Tom didn't wait long, before he took over.

Corbo grinned and dropped back behind.

Amber danced along at times, where the sun beamed through the trees. At others, she pulled her backpack into arms and held it close.

Alex walked behind her as much as he could. Her excitement was contagious. Something obviously bothered her, and he'd have to find out what. Maybe a boyfriend she didn't want to leave behind?

The trees thinned. The peak of the sleeping volcano rose to meet them. No visible caldera in sight. Overgrown with trees, bushes, and lived in by animals for thousands of years. Perhaps it was visible on a satellite map.

Tom pulled the wagon to a stop.

"Over there would be good." Alex sat Tom's bag down. He helped Tom lift the seismometer.

Stillness echoed.

The ground vibrated.

Trees and rocks shook.

Stones tumbled down the slope.

The wagon rolled into Corbo's leg.

The seismometer slipped.

Alex and Tom fought to steady themselves and the equipment. Only a few feet from where they wanted it, they managed to stay

almost upright and set it on the ground safely.

Alex collapsed on the ground and drew a deep breath. He checked to be sure everyone was okay.

Amber had landed on her hands and knees behind Corbo.

Corbo rubbed his shin, where the mostly empty wagon had struck. "I'm okay."

"Not a strong quake. Too much movement on an unbalanced hillside," Tom said.

Amber stood up, shakily. "Dangerous for sure. Glad we were at the top and none of the rocks could fall on us." She swiped at the dirt on her legs.

"Amber, can you bring Tom's bag and mine? I wish we could have recorded that one." Alex sat up from his awkward position on the ground.

Amber put her bag down against a tree and carried the other two bags over. She sat beside Alex.

Alex and Tom steadied and prepared the seismometer.

Warmth beyond the heat of the day flooded through his veins. He had worn shorts on the plane, and hadn't changed. Thankfully, this was not an active volcano, and lava couldn't splatter his legs. The scar on his leg pulsed from the adrenaline rush. It sure felt like an active volcano at the moment. He glanced up to see Amber watching him and the equipment.

He blushed and turned away.

Brandon and Amber's mom had brought a few of the seismometers they used. Almost identical, they were set to monitor different frequencies.

Alex programmed the GPS station to verify changes in spatial readings. The satellite would update them regularly. Any height difference in the mountain would indicate change that needed to be verified in person.

Tom set up the atmospheric monitoring equipment. Various gases and temperature changes would be recorded with it, and transferred to the satellites as well.

All this high tech equipment would remain on the mountain, so humans wouldn't have to. So much could affect the equipment, especially rain, solar storms, quakes, magma, animals, and other humans. Hopefully, the equipment here, and the other stations they would set up, would show that the government's worry and concern were unnecessary.

Alex verified that the monitors were stable, and as protected

from the elements and falling tree limbs as possible.

Screen readings flicked on. Everything was up and running. "Normally, I would wait to obtain a range of readings. That quake, probably a 3.0 makes me nervous. Let's hurry back down the mountain."

Tom put his hand on Alex's arm. "I want to be down as fast you. For safety, let's have a little water and a snack first."

Alex sighed. "You're right. Holding onto that wagon, even empty, all the way down will take energy." He sat on a rock, and opened his pack to pull out some dried fruit and nuts.

The landscape of trees, mountains, and desert was like a picture out of time. No sign of humans anywhere. They could be the first people to have ever set foot here, even though the well-worn trail was only feet away.

Amber munched her own snacks. "Beautiful. I'm afraid it's going to change forever, and we'll be here to see it."

Alex laughed. "Most people would think that was a good thing. Being able to see the change as it occurs, that is."

Amber's lips curved. "They have no idea the damage an earthquake can do, or a volcano for that matter."

He shoved the food back in his pack. "True enough. Everyone ready?"

Salsa music filled the air.

Corbo shook his head and answered his phone. "Yes Livia. I'm okay. No, please don't come. Not right now."

Alex took the wagon handle and started down the mountain trail.

Corbo caught up and took it from him. "Better hurry, she might show up."

Chapter 7

Sierra Blanca, New Mexico

Amber picked up her pack. The scenery belied the danger that lurked inches under the ground cover. One last glance at the monitoring equipment, and she turned to follow Tom.

Corbo lead the group down the trail they had come up, allowing the empty wagon to roll in front of him for now.

Alex reached for a leaf on a tree. "In Hawaii, people walk on freshly cooled lava all the time. People think it's fun. A good way to spend a vacation day. Not all volcanoes are that way though. The ones around here weren't when they were young."

"I imagine not. The earthquakes, the Rio Grande Rift Valley, and hundreds of faults cover what people think is a stable region. Hundreds of unknown or unstudied faults, concern me." Amber leaned against a tree to steady herself on the uneven trail.

Alex reached for her hand. "Try not to worry. There is nothing we can do to stop one. We can only hope to predict it."

He gazed up into the trees. "Or let Mother Nature predict. I think she's trying to tell us something big is happening now. The birds, squirrels, and rabbits have listened. The question is; will we?" He looked in her eyes, held her hand, before he turned back to the trail.

Amber wasn't sure what to do. She had barely met Alex a few hours before. No boyfriend had ever held her hand before. Karen had always been the one with a boyfriend. Earthquake ravines were far steeper than this trail, and she'd navigated those without incident. Heat raced up and down her spine, and breathing was far more difficult than it should be. Quakes had never affected her this way. Somehow, having her hand held was comforting, in a way she didn't expect.

About halfway down the mountain, her cell phone buzzed like bees. She pulled her hand away and fumbled in her backpack for it.

"Hi Mom. No, we were near the top of Sierra Blanca. Haven't seen any signs. A 3.2? Okay, we'll be careful. We're halfway back to the van. See you tonight."

Alex, Tom, and Corbo stared at her from a few feet lower on the trail.

Heat rose in Amber's cheeks. She hurried down the path, and brushed past the others. The wagon rolled in front of Tom, whose turn it had been to try to keep it from running down the mountain without them. Amber jerked the handle out of his hands and let the momentum of the wagon speed her down the trail without noticing the closeness of branches and trees.

Alex caught up to her, and took hold of the wagon handle as they reached the three quarters down marker. "Hey Amber, slow down. Don't hurry so much. You use twice as much energy that way."

Amber let go of the handle and said, "Sorry, it's embarrassing that they call to check on me over every little thing."

Alex stopped and lifted her chin in his hand. "A few years ago, I felt the same way. Now, I wish my mom could have called me when that rumble happened. Is it the volcano? Is it an earthquake? It may be both. This isn't walking to the corner store on a sunny day, in a safe seaside town. This is business. The other team needed to know we were all safe and our job was done. They could have called any of us. It is about you, though not all about you."

Alex held her chin a moment. He let go, and stared off down the trail. His eyes teared. "Sorry. I miss my mom. And, helping her and dad, rather than trying to do it all myself. Not used to it, I guess. After a year, you'd think."

"Alex," Tom said. "I'm here too. You did a good job up there. We have a lot more work to do. Let's go back to the van."

Amber nodded. Alex's reaction was familiar. She had always been sure of her opinions before. Now, she was unsure if she knew enough when put to the test. Then, Karen had been beside her. Apparently, Alex missed his mom as much as she missed her dad.

Tom reached his hand to Alex's shoulder. He turned to Amber. "I know it's not easy to be in their shadow. They sent you with us though, because they trust you, and your opinion. If your mom didn't care, she wouldn't have called. She wanted to check and see where our team was, and let you know, she was safe. You didn't ask where they were when the quake struck. You'll give an honest scientific report. That's why they didn't call Alex. They don't know him personally." Tom half grinned. It didn't quite work.

Alex checked his phone. "They may have tried to call me. My signal isn't good here. Guess I need to see what we can do about that at camp tonight."

"Sorry," Amber said. "Let's go. I guess we are all trying to do what we think is best." This whole trip on the mountainside had been

a bit too much for her. Strange emotions clouded her mind. Why hadn't she asked her mom where she was? Her mom could have been in more danger than she was.

The memory of Karen and her own dad had hurt. Brandon never could, and never tried, to replace her own dad. He was always there when she needed someone to talk to, almost as much as her mom.

The heat she felt when talking to Alex scared her. He was different than anyone she had ever known her own age. Not at all like Jerry. Alex could almost be trusted, maybe. He'd never be Karen, not able to laugh and share silly things, as well as scientific things. Not that they were silly much. He might not even like cats.

They walked on down the mountain, ignoring Corbo. Amber watched for signs of land deformation. Animals or people walking on the mountain trail could have made the few visible changes. Vegetation flattened and rocks on top of plants in places. Some freshly disturbed from the quake today.

Amber was at the back of the line as the trail entered the parking lot. They hadn't seen many animals coming back down either. A few birds twittered and squirrels chattered along the edges of the parking lot.

Corbo opened the back doors to put the wagon in.

A typical fast food style bag with the name "Little Italy Deli" in forest green squashed beside the other equipment Tom and Alex had brought.

Corbo slammed the door shut.

Amber jumped at the sound.

"Okay, anywhere else today?" The seat groaned under Corbo's weight. "Livia hasn't shown up, and we want to be gone before she does."

Alex put his hands to his forehead. "Tom and I have been up way too long to go anywhere else."

He yawned. "We need to do more. Without a nap, I don't think we can."

"Okay, back to camp then?"

"It's midday." Tom yawned and stretched. "We can take a short nap, and check the terrain for taking more equipment out tomorrow."

Alex nodded. "Sure. My head is starting to hurt. The pressure and temperature is drastically different here than Hawaii."

"And the plane noise for nearly seven hours didn't help," Tom said.

After the van was on the road, Amber said, "I noticed the 'Little

Italy Deli' bag. Is there a good Italian restaurant near here?"

"Sure, the one Livia's parents own. She brings food from there sometimes. She won't let me meet them, though," Corbo said.

"Why not?"

Corbo laughed as he steered through traffic. "What do you think? The strong Mexican fieldworker with a beautiful Italian girlfriend. She knows they won't like me."

That wasn't a nice thing to say about himself.

"They barely tolerate her. Sending her off to find out what she wants. She doesn't know any more than I do what she wants from life. Isn't much to offer around here."

Amber disagreed. Plenty of farmland to explore, places to dig, and read the stories the earth tells of its past, as well as predictions for the future of this community. "What is Livia like? Will she be joining us?" Having a friend to talk with would be nice, though no one could replace Karen.

"Not sure she will want to. She is a jealous person, and spends a lot of time with her rally group."

Alex bumped into Amber as the van swerved for a curve. "What kind of group are they?"

Corbo slowed for a stop sign. "One that doesn't like scientists, military bases, or much else. They spend a lot of time preparing for their 'second coming,' and they think both scientists and the military are speeding us there."

"Wouldn't that make them happy?" Tom asked.

"You'd think so. Though, it doesn't. Guess they want to live as much as the rest of us."

Corbo steered hard around a curve. "The group didn't seem half-bad a while back. It's one thing to know that the military bases aren't good for the environment. It's another to try to make them to leave. That won't happen."

Tom glanced back at Alex and said, "Can Livia help Dr. Rebecca with her work? It would keep her busy."

"No. She tried once. Livia was so resentful of the way Dr. Rebecca gets me to do whatever she wants. It made her too jealous to come around much. She doesn't understand. At work, you are ordered around. In personal life, it's different."

Alex held onto the seat. "Livia doesn't try to order you around too much, I hope."

"Sometimes. She claims it's just the way she is. I laugh, and say she is just as capable as I am, and less tired, as she doesn't have a

job. Then she gets mad and tries to accuse me of liking Dr. Rebecca more. As if. She's almost as old as my mother!"

Amber tried not to laugh at that statement. Dr. Rebecca's work was her world. As her role model, Amber knew Dr. Rebecca wasn't perfect. People served the purpose they were there to complete, and nothing else. She rarely let anyone know her any better. In fact, she'd treat Brandon, Alex, and Tom as more workhorse than friends. Maybe better, because they would be helping put the data together. Even Amber was still a kid to her, until she proved what she knew and could do.

The tired group arrived back at camp and trooped to the sleeping quarters.

Amber walked into her room and put the pack down on the bed. She wanted a nap. There hadn't been much sleep the night before, the early morning wake up call, plane ride, and then the quake was more chaos than she normally faced in a month all scrambled into one day. However, Alex and Tom had been awake and going even more hours. If she rested for a few minutes, they could freshen up before their nap, and then she could take her time.

"Amber?" Alex peeked in the door. "Do you need in the bathroom?"

"Not now. Go ahead. How long do you want to rest?" Amber pulled out a travel alarm clock.

"Call your mom and have her wake us when she returns." He glanced at the room, enough space to walk between the bed and the wall. "This room's almost a closet."

Tom closed the bathroom door.

"It's okay." Amber said.

"Our room is bigger, for two of us. Wish they had left you a little more room." Alex leaned against the doorframe.

"Don't need it, do I? A table to put my clothes on would be nice. I'll be fine."

Alex closed the door as Tom passed him in the tiny hallway.

She stretched out for a moment.

Water trickled in the bathroom across the hall.

Karen would miss so much here. Two young scientists to learn from, and if she liked one of them better than Jerry, perhaps, they could work and travel together in the future. Better than leaving her best friend behind. A call, or an email, might still bring her to New Mexico.

Her phone rang, interrupting her dream of Karen, Tom, and Alex

following her through a wooded valley with smoke rising from a distant mountain peak. She grumbled as she reached for the phone.

"Hi Mom. Yes. We were napping. I was supposed to call you. Sorry. I'll wake Alex and Tom. Be there in a few minutes."

Voices vibrated in the background. Groggy, she couldn't determine who was speaking, or what they were saying. She ignored it. In the hallway she stumbled, and knocked on Alex and Tom's door.

"Um," half groaned an unrecognizable voice.

"Alex, Tom, wake up. Dr. Rebecca wants us in the other trailer now."

"K, minute." Mattress springs clattered covering up the vibrating voices in the background.

Amber waited.

Alex opened the door.

Tom rubbed his neck as he sat up, yawned, and stretched.

"What's that screeching?" Alex asked.

"I thought maybe you had music playing." Amber grabbed her phone and bag before she closed her door.

"No. Not us."

Amber glanced out the window. Beyond the two trailers, a group of people carried picket signs. They circled the parking lot, screamed, and shouted.

"What do the signs say?" Tom said, half asleep.

Alex opened the door between the trailers an inch.

"Go away!"

"Stop the shaking!"

"End the research!"

"Don't invite trouble!"

The protestors screamed and marched in their direction.

Alex steered Amber toward the other trailer. "Come on Tom, now."

Once they were inside, he locked the door behind them, and looked out the window.

"They want us to leave. They think our visit caused the tremor today," Dr. Rebecca said.

"It's more complex than that," Corbo said. "They think the military are to blame as well. They may be partly to blame. I think we should use one of their bombs to stop the quakes, like in the movies. Dr. Rebecca doesn't think so."

Amber's mouth gaped. Her thoughts flew too fast to find words to

express them.

"No, Amber, I would never advise that," Dr. Rebecca said. "We have no idea if they would stop the quakes, make them worse, or cause the sleeping volcanoes to wake up as well. It's too dangerous."

"And I think we should try something to relieve the stress," Corbo said.

"Or create more stress, of a new and more dangerous type," Dr. Rebecca said.

"It's no worse than what the military is already doing, testing bombs out there on the range. We don't know what the effects of those are either. Have they tested any new ones lately?" Corbo stood up as he spoke.

Dr. Rebecca sighed. "I don't know. And if they are testing them, they could be hitting undocumented faults, causing some of the issues we have experienced lately. You know we aren't allowed any information that might be confidential."

"And you're not even allowed to study many of the faults that lie in this great plain. You don't even know how many faults there are on White Sands. Or, if there are any new rifts on the bases. Military testing could be causing the seismic activity and they would never tell you. How many times have they refused to answer your polite emails asking for clarification?"

"Corbo. That's enough. There is nothing we can do to change what they do, or don't do. I wish there was."

"Lives could be in danger because of what we don't know. You've taught me that much."

Dr. Rebecca sighed. "The military requested these experts to come here for that reason. We will find answers."

Dr. Rebecca picked up her coffee cup. "Now, please, go call your girlfriend, and tell her, and her rally group, to leave this property before I call the rangers. They don't understand what they are picketing. As soon as we have information, we will hold a press conference."

He nodded. "I'll try. She doesn't listen to me any more than you do. If I didn't need her." He glared at Dr. Rebecca and stormed out the door.

Dr. Rebecca glanced around at the astonished faces. "Sorry. We disagree on what to do here. The government officials want answers as much as we do, without alarming the public unnecessarily. Of the three supervolcanoes on our continent, one is here at Valle's

Caldera, north is Yellowstone, and out west, a third, Long Valley, in California. All show changes in their underground lava fields, as well as increased tremors, both in intensity and duration. A decision on what, and when, to tell the public has to be made soon."

Dr. Rebecca placed her coffee cup beside her computer. "Amber, thanks for pointing out the accumulated, across country dangers to your mom. She alerted me. I reviewed your notes, and many more. Without your help, you wouldn't be here."

Amber listened. She pulled up the map and reviewed the geographical features between the Rio Grande and Yellowstone.

Dr. Rebecca spoke in the background. "One more tremor like today, or one of greater magnitude, and we have to do something. We need all of your knowledge, skills, expertise, and all the facts you can gather as fast as you can. Let's all work together. Claire you may share today's adventures."

"We were able to see quite a bit today. I'm verifying the data to determine where the quake we felt originated. There were several small ones locally, mostly on and around White Sands," Amber's mom said.

"Meaning we will never know how much deformation there was?" Amber asked.

"Perhaps. I think General Nord will share with us; he has to if he wants answers. How much did you all manage today?"

Alex shared the day's story, at least the scientific part. He left out the emotional reactions on the trail.

They hadn't done enough. Amber knew that. Equipment should have been set up in at least one more place. If they hadn't all been so tired from lack of sleep, tempers wouldn't have flared, and they could have made it to the Carrizozo Malpais. She hadn't made a good impression on Dr. Rebecca being asleep when the adult team returned, that was obvious.

Corbo stomped back in, sat down, and glared at the floor.

Dr. Rebecca walked to the New Mexico map on the wall. "I have some old maps, recently digitized, of the survey information done before these lands became top secret. Until we have an updated one, this is all we have to go on."

"Dr. Rebecca?" Amber switched the screen to local geologic maps and pulled up the Inland Seaway maps beside them.

"Yes, Amber?"

"I hope we can see the faults. We need to, if we are going to determine what the government should tell the people. Is there

someone who can tell us what's changed on these maps?"

"I hope so. We need to review and understand the old maps tonight. Tomorrow, you three place the next batch of seismometers. We may not have much time. The quakes are coming faster and stronger."

Alex pointed to the lava flows around Socorro. "What about here? There are so many quakes clustered in Socorro."

"The lava depth is changing there too. It appears the hot spot that was once under the Magdalena Mountains may have shifted to the east. The land is rising in a few spots, and lowering in others." Tom searched for data from the last few years.

"It may be forming a new caldera." Alex pointed to a data set from two days ago.

Tom compared the data from the last few years with the last few weeks. "Perhaps more than one. The rising land is often a mile or so in diameter. There are four known increasing spots, that have risen about a foot since accurate measurements have been made over the last few decades. Valleys, scarcely visible, have formed between them."

Alex whistled. "Not enough for the public to notice, only the equipment."

"It could be nothing, or something. The magma is closer to the surface in those four regions though." The map shifted as he plotted what would happen if the current changes continued unabated for a few more weeks.

"Anywhere else to worry about?"

The mountains on the map rose, and topography changed as Tom's program worked.

"Here of course. The sensors fluctuate after each quake." Tom zoomed out to show the White Sands and Sand Andres fault line.

"I see data coming in from the equipment we set up today," Alex said.

Corbo walked over and looked at the screen. "How does it help?"

"The more locations we have measuring equipment located, the easier, and more accurately we can determine epicenters," Amber's mom said.

Corbo nodded and turned to Alex, "The other machine you set up?"

"The one that measures atmospheric gases? It only works for a small area. If a fumarole developed half a mile, perhaps even a quarter mile away, it might not detect it."

"The seismometers work for miles, I guess," Corbo said.

"Depends on the size of the quake, and the terrain it has to pass through. Most will detect miles away. Some quakes have been large enough to be detected across the globe. The more equipment we have running, the more accurate our measurements," Dr. Rebecca said.

"What about the Datil-Mogollon Volcanic Field and the Aden lava flows?" Amber asked.

Dr. Rebecca handed Amber an empty coffee cup, and said, "We don't know. I have student teams going there tomorrow to set up any extra equipment we can spare. We will do all of the monitoring from here. They have to return to campus for exams. I figure the day after tomorrow we will begin monitoring all of these sites. Scientists around the world are setting up all the spare equipment they have, no matter the age or condition."

Chapter 8

The Valley of Fires State Park, New Mexico

Amber learned the nuances of the volcanologist's equipment and GPS units. Alex and Tom showed her how each piece worked, and how important they were for studying volcanoes, as well as earthquakes. Though she knew the basics, it had always been someone else's job to set up the equipment, while she scouted the area looking for telltale fault scars.

The rough ground made travel slow. A month ago, the trip would have taken a week of camping, sightseeing, and stories along the way. No time now. They had to hurry, and not slow down for the scenery. Rocks tripped them. Sand slipped into their shoes. Scorpions peeked out at them from the shadows of boulders. The sun scorched their skin, with not a cloud in sight.

Her skin burned from the intense rays, as it never did in the vegetated hills of California. Rest stops ended with yawns in the extreme heat and sunshine. Emptied backpacks felt heavier on the walk back to the van. Arms and water bottles emptied, they stumbled back into camp.

Amber's mom and Brandon talked over their finds. Their bits of conversation she instantly recognized, unlike some of the bits Tom and Alex had discussed today. While there were similarities, there were also striking differences between the study of earthquakes and volcanoes. Fresh flowing magma and lava had different properties than the ancient rocks she usually studied. Her knowledge didn't include plumes and bulges, and their interactions with the surrounding countryside.

Amber's computer screen filled with open windows as she sorted data. Her phone buzzed.

"Hello. Hi Karen. How are you? Taffy had four kittens. That's great! Everything's good there? Call your dad. He wants to talk to you." Amber listened to a quick story about Jerry, and said goodbye so Karen could call Brandon.

Tom's screen blinked, catching her attention.

He opened an email.

"Anything interesting?"

"Sure. Wait till Alex's back."

Alex returned with drinks and snacks, sharing with Tom and Amber.

"Alex, remember that project we started?" Tom said.

"Barely. Seems like months ago."

"Your friend Shelly completed the project, and shared the results with my mom, who forwarded them on to your dad."

"Good. If they had been spectacular, he would have called. He probably knew them already, anyway." Alex toed Amber's bag out of the walkway and sat down.

"Oh, they were unique. The lava is changing density and composition in unexpected ways."

Alex rolled his chair over to Tom's screen. "In what ways?"

"The hot spot could be moving faster than expected. Your dad is too busy trying to verify the results were computed correctly. After all, we used the wrong equipment." Tom grinned.

Alex stared at the screen so hard he almost fell into it." And, he is sending his students back out to duplicate the experiment, as well as a team to Loihi. He isn't going himself."

Tom reached out to Alex, "It's okay. He's probably trying to verify all his data sets are right."

"He has so much trouble walking. That last collection trip was terrible on him. He hobbled back to the van."

"Don't worry. Mom will take care of him."

Dr. Rebecca walked over. "Alex, do you have access to your dad's information? We need to verify the lava density changes here as well. If they are comparable they may help us."

"Sure. I'll email him. Are there any open calderas here? We brought a few COSPECs to measure the volcanic gases."

Dr. Rebecca shook her head and placed her hand on his shoulder. "Not here. We can test the density in a few places. Once we see lava here, it's too late. People wouldn't survive the explosion to let us know its composition, at least at some of the volcanoes."

"A mine might work," Amber said.

"Or drill a well. It might relieve some of the tension and stress." Corbo plunked his plate on the counter and walked over.

Alex enlarged the picture. "It could fracture the rock, placing the lives of the drillers, and anyone near, at risk."

"We don't have time or money to drill a new hole, and it can take years to select the best spot. The ground is changing too fast. There are mines in some of the mountains around," Dr. Rebecca said.

"Perhaps they can help. They should have some equipment monitoring already, even if it is less extensive than what you have."

Tom changed the screen to search for the local mines. "They can let us know if their mining operations have noticed any changes. Extra heat, unexpected rock deformation, drilling difficulties, deadly gasses. It might be a good idea to take one of the smaller COSPECS to one of the mines closer to the activity."

"I'm going to call first thing in the morning to organize a meeting. We will meet the government and mining officials at Kirtland Air Force Base. It's almost out of the active area, though close enough so those who need to know our results can easily gather there."

Dr. Rebecca turned to go back to her seat.

The work trailer rocked on its wheels.

She staggered and grabbed a chair that slid across the room, pulling her with it.

Computer screens bounced with results coming in from the field.

Monitors flickered.

Amber grabbed hers from habit.

"I think that was a 5.5," Amber's mom said as she steadied herself in the chair.

"Likely," Brandon said. "It must have been close to here."

"Not necessarily," Dr. Rebecca said. "The waves tend to flow further and easier inside the valley basins than they do in California."

"At least the computers are bolted down." Amber steadied her notes on the desk.

"Check outside," Amber's mom said. "The other trailer might have suffered damage."

Amber carried her notes to the window. The trailer's thin skin would crumple if one of the larger trees fell. A geologically active location really needed reinforced walls. Branches had fallen on the ground she didn't think had been there before. Otherwise, no obvious damage.

She maneuvered through backpacks and papers to her computer. Data flashed on the screen. Lost in the numbers and words, a classical music tone interrupted her work.

Dr. Rebecca answered her phone. "Hello? Dr. Evan. What? That's incredible. Okay, watch it and let me know if anything changes."

Dr. Rebecca closed her phone and turned to Amber's mom. "Claire, the magnetic field shifted at the same time as that last

quake. Compasses are now reading a place about 20 miles further south in Russia as magnetic north."

"Will it last?"

"No idea. You've studied magnetic shifts in earthquake zones?"

"Some. I know someone in Washington State who has more knowledge than I do."

"Call them. Access their information, and work on the data. I'll give you Dr. Evan's email too. Brandon, check for epicenters and changes across the globe."

Dr. Rebecca turned to Amber, "Anything?"

"The equipment isn't giving us any helpful readings. The numbers are scrolling, and tremors are ongoing. There could be multiple epicenters, or one event triggered another."

Tom slid back in his seat and almost hit Brandon. "Wow! Look at this!"

Amber glanced over at his screen. The picture showed a lava field under the Magdalena Peak.

"It's going deeper, and narrowing. Bad news."

The group crowded around his screen.

Alex pointed at the magma chamber. "The land deformation has spiked ten feet in the air." He turned to the others, face pale. "She might erupt."

Dr. Rebecca closed her eyes and leaned back. "How soon do you think?"

"Hard to say, another quake like that, and anytime." Alex paused while reviewing the screen. "The inland craton plates are slipping, adjusting the hot spots. Not good. I'm going to check more data." The picture on the screen continued shifting, as the land resettled.

Dr. Rebecca turned to Amber, "Anything?"

Amber turned back to her screen. "Too much. Alex is right." She pointed to the screen. "Here, the Rio Grande Rift has shifted the eastern plate about two inches further east. Won't that mess with GPS readings?" If the craton plates moved enough to open new hot spots, or reopen old ones, anything could happen.

Dr. Rebecca stared at the screen. "Some. They'll adjust in about 24 hours, not enough to matter to most people. Miners and pilots will be affected. They are used to some fluctuation."

Amber's screen panned and showed the whole region that had changed. "Texas and New Mexico are splitting along the Rio Grande. They may split further apart and open the seaway again."

Dr. Rebecca turned towards her own computer. "Not in a lifetime.

That kind of change is expected to take millions, or at least thousands of years. Right now, the water flows south. It would have to reverse flow to turn these once ocean basins back into ocean again. Plus, as dry as it's been for millennia, the ground won't hold the water. Water tables will have to fill up first."

"We only think it takes millennia," Brandon said. "For all we know, a few sudden events could cause it. The quakes for the last several hundred years may have been leading to this pivotal event."

A hard winter and lots of snow up north followed by a hot summer could fill the water tables faster than anyone thought. Especially, if water infrastructure broke and people lost access to using it. Amber didn't want her world to change. Her dreams for a future scurrying through ancient faults, and discovering new ways to predict future ones slipped and slid like the faults on the screen in front of her.

Brandon looked at the screen again. "Once, scientists thought Washington State's Channeled Scablands damage took as long to create as the Grand Canyon. The damage caused by an ice dam of the Cordilleran ice sheet breaking at the end of the last ice age caused Glacial Lake Missoula to create the scablands in a matter of days."

Memories of the documentaries Amber had watched flowed before her eyes, dimming her current surroundings. The ice dam had ruptured and refroze many times, with sudden massive flooding, killing all living things in its path. Entire forests washed away. Scars remained visible, odd canyons where canyons shouldn't be, places where little to nothing grew, even today. Other areas recovered, and re-forested, with deep ravines that appeared to have once held surging rivers. Rivers that gushed for hours, maybe days, dropped boulders as they diminished on their seaward journey. The ancient floods gave Washington State many of its prominent features. Much like how the Colorado River dug out the Grand Canyon in six million or more years, depending on which theory you read.

Something serious was happening in New Mexico, and around the world. It could rip the nation apart. If the Rio Grande widened, towns would be inundated. A volcano explosion, especially in the Valles Caldera, or Yellowstone would devastate the region, and potentially destroy the military bases. And if more than one supervolcano erupted, a volcanic winter would devastate crops, animals, and human lives.

Amber gulped. She pulled up a map online and reviewed the link

between the Rio Grande, Valles Caldera, and Yellowstone. An eruption at either could send streams of lava down the river of water. Though it might be fascinating to see, the devastation would be disastrous.

"Alex," she whispered. "Please tell me Yellowstone won't blow."

Alex studied the line she had drawn. He pointed to the northeast of the last active Yellowstone caldera. "The hot spot should be here. There are whole teams, and websites devoted to equipment monitoring it."

"And none on Valles?"

Alex shook his head. "It's been declared extinct. Monitoring tends to focus on visitors, trails, and wildlife."

Which means it isn't a priority. Amber closed her eyes. She would prove to Dr. Rebecca, and her mom, that she could research and run the reports without Karen to check her work.

Alex's hand shook. "No need to worry everyone now. Wait until tomorrow."

Amber understood why the government didn't want anyone to know. What could they say? And where could people go to safety?

Chapter 9

The Valley of Fires State Park, New Mexico and Kirtland AFB, New Mexico

Alex grabbed the last pages as they spit out of the printer. They contained even more data to examine as the group rode to the meeting at Kirtland AFB. The graphs and charts were too colorful to contain good news. After climbing in the vehicle, he handed some of them to Amber.

Alex's pages were covered in volcanic updates, that changed by the hour. Some bulges seemed to be fluctuating. A rise of a few feet, then a relaxing, almost like a person trying to prevent themselves from throwing up. The end result could be a violent eruption during a bulge's subsiding period, taking everyone by surprise.

It had happened before, at Santorini, Vesuvius, and perhaps many more. He should have checked the data for the remains of the Santorini hot spot as well. There'd be time tonight. Alex marked the top of one page Check Santorini's current and historical growth and explosion patterns! Meanwhile, Tom could verify Vesuvius, and the active almost supervolcanoes in South America.

Alex peeked over at the pages in Amber's hands. "What do you see?"

The charts and maps blurred as she flipped through the pages. "Too much information. We don't have anything to compare these events to. What we have is a large area," her finger drew a circle on the map, "that has frequently had slight earthquakes too small for most people to sense. It has a ring of dormant volcanoes that most people think are only mountains. Now, the magma underneath, the water tables, and the magnetic field are shifting."

Alex pointed at the pages. "And that ring is only one group of volcanoes. New Mexico is littered with the remains of volcanoes, whether as lava beds, cinder cones, and even hot springs. This area is as volcanic in origin as Yellowstone or Hawaii."

Amber flipped through the pages. Hawaii showed an increase in quakes, too. Less than one tenth of a percent, and even their intensity was barely increased. So far, Yellowstone showed no unexpected changes. She closed her eyes. "There is no record of so

many events occurring at once in recent recorded history. Or so scattered."

"What about unrecorded history?" Alex asked.

She closed the research folder. "We don't know. If there is, we haven't found, evaluated, researched, and documented it. Few regions have been studied intently. These events could be right under our feet, especially in war torn countries. No one knows, or has had the opportunity to study every inch of ground." Amber piled the pages together and handed them back to him.

Amber's mom peered back at them. "Many places were surveyed with equipment that is outdated now. More sensitive equipment might have given us a better picture. And yet, without the early equipment, we wouldn't have any pictures."

Dr. Rebecca nodded. "It's uncharted territory. Add the nuclear concerns, and there could be real danger for everyone."

"Are there nuclear weapons stored underground?"

Dr. Rebecca turned in her seat. "That is part of what we have to find out today."

"I hope they tell us," Amber said.

"We may know, by how they act. We have to be sure they understand the seriousness of what could happen. Imagine if the ground shifts six inches one way, or the other, shearing off a nuclear bomb in the rifts."

"Are they tightly packed in individual holes?" Alex asked.

"Perhaps not. The effects might be safer if only one explodes, and none of the blast can escape above ground. However, if many are stored in a large pit and several fall and explode." Dr. Rebecca's voice trailed off.

Alex shivered at the thought. A few nuclear bombs together could blow a crater larger than any active volcano. If the bombs were stored in scattered bunkers across the hundreds of miles of military complexes in this part of the state, craters would litter the surface for miles.

"The bombs could set off a massive chain reaction. The whole state would be in danger. If one storage pit blows, setting off the one next to it, nothing could stop it. Half the state could end up pocked like the moon."

"Or worse," Amber's mom said. "They could be strong enough to rupture the Rio Grande fault more, pushing New Mexico further one way, or the other."

"That would change the climate too, and who knows what

dramatic climate change would do to modern civilization," Tom said.

"All the dust from the explosions and volcanoes would give us an awfully cold winter," Amber said.

"Not to mention the loss of livestock and crops. Can you imagine going back to candles and fireplaces? Most people don't have the patience, or the skills to use them to heat, cook, or read by. If they even have one." Dr. Rebecca said.

"This is all happening too fast. I don't want to be cut off from dad." Alex clenched his fists. Being on his own had seemed great back in Hawaii. A chance to make his father proud. Everything had to work out okay.

Amber squeezed her phone. "If the Rio Grande shifts, more North American cratons may form, or old ones split. We don't even know how many there are. New mountain ranges will develop in places they aren't already, or even increase the eastern march of the Rocky Mountains."

She pulled out a map. "It may even fold some of the land further east as it stresses. The great lakes would take some of the compression, while." Her voice trailed off as she stared at the map.

"It could crumple Niagara Falls like a cookie." Alex said. "And close off the main artery from the Great Lakes to the Atlantic Ocean. The lakes would then flood low lying cities and towns."

"All conjecture at this point," Dr. Rebecca said. "The science is ever evolving, changing as fast as the earth does. Let's try not to worry about what may, or may not be happening, and enjoy the drive."

Corbo jerked the steering wheel. "Geology will have to wait. Right now, we have immediate problems."

Several vehicles jammed with people boxed in their van. Those people opened their windows and shouted. They waved at Corbo, red faced.

With the van windows shut and so many shouting simultaneously, it was difficult to understand what the people shouted.

"Sorry," Corbo said. "I had to tell Livia where we were going today. I didn't think she would tell anyone." Corbo swerved to avoid hitting the vehicle on their right.

Dr. Rebecca grabbed her phone. "I'll call the police and have them secure our laboratory and campsite. As well as rescue us from these ralliers."

Alex sighed. They had so much equipment in the labs. A few

books he would need later had been left at camp, to protect them from being lost. If the ralliers decided to burn down their trailers, he might lose some of his valued resources signed by his dad and mom. Mom's picture was there too, under the mattress.

Sirens blared in the distance. Flashing lights appeared behind them.

"Corbo, slow down," Dr. Rebecca said.

"No. I can't see the windshield of the car behind me. It'll hit us."

"Let off the gas."

Blaring police cars gained on them.

The vehicles beside them became more aggressive and swerved inward at the same time. They were playing chicken. For the moment anyway.

Corbo slowed.

Sirens blared in the background. Horns, screams, and shouts enveloped the van.

The police cars screeched up behind the vehicles.

Corbo hit the brakes as the vehicles on either side swerved inward towards the van.

Alex held onto the seat, so he wouldn't slide off into the floor.

The car behind hit them, while the two who were beside them crashed almost front end first into each other.

Corbo took his hands off the wheel. Out of breath, and sweating, he stepped out of the van.

The first policemen checked the car behind them. The second police car drove around and parked in front of the head on collision.

The shouts and moans of the ralliers echoed around them. The ones who were in the collision wouldn't be going anywhere soon. Of course, neither would they, being in the middle.

Dr. Rebecca stepped out of the van to talk to the police officers. After a few minutes, she turned back to the van.

The lead vehicle had kept going and not slowed down. It was long out of sight.

"Come on," Dr. Rebecca said. "If everyone is okay, we are going to walk around the other cars. Dr. Evan is coming for us."

"Don't we have to wait for paperwork to be filled out?" Amber's mom asked.

"No. Not this time. I gave them my business card and explained that we are late for a meeting at the base. They can take care of it from here. The insurance agent will send a wrecker for the van."

Alex helped Amber out. Her mom and Brandon stepped out,

shaken, and soon steadied. He picked up papers and laptop bags from the floor and under the seats.

The team gathered around the door to carry the items they needed for the meeting.

"I hope my screen didn't bust." Amber opened her case to check the computer.

"Should be okay," Brandon said.

Corbo stayed beside them. As they walked to the front, he remained hidden from the view of the police officers. He sat behind them, out of sight.

Traffic was light, so there weren't many cars stuck behind the wreck. About twenty minutes later, a brown and green military vehicle raced southbound towards them. It almost passed them, then crossed the median and stopped right beside them.

The window rolled down and a man said, "Dr. Rebecca, your ride."

She grabbed the doorframe of the transport jeep. "Thanks, Dr. Evan. Glad I called you as soon as I did."

Corbo ducked into the truck.

Dr. Rebecca stepped in followed by the rest of the team.

Alex took an empty seat in the back next to Corbo. The officers had not questioned Corbo, even though he had been the one driving the van. His evasion was unexpected after his boasts of the days before.

The truck rattled to a start.

Ambulance sirens grew louder as Dr. Evan drove off.

Corbo sat with his face in his hands.

"Why are you hiding from the police?" Alex said.

He looked up sharply, and took in a deep breath.

"It's okay," Dr. Rebecca said. "Tell them. They need to know, if you're going to work with them."

He glanced at the group and mumbled.

"Corbo, what?" Alex leaned closer.

Corbo jerked away.

Alex sat back and glanced across at Dr. Rebecca.

"Corbo, I won't speak for you. I didn't see Livia in any of those three cars. She is either ahead, or behind us. I hope ahead of us. The Air Force can try to contain her."

Corbo almost grinned. "It's for my safety. My parents were illegal immigrants. I was born here, and lived here all my life. No paperwork. They didn't care about that as migrant workers. It didn't

matter when they came, or they didn't know. They never said, and won't answer my questions. I don't exist. If a cop asks for my ID, they'll arrest and deport me, no questions asked."

"You didn't have to have a birth certificate to go to school?" Alex asked as the seat bounced out from under him.

Dr. Evan steered the vehicle off the ramp and through the crowded streets of town.

"Migrant workers move so much, schools forget to ask. And, they can't deny an education if you don't have one. By middle school, they forget about them."

"You have to have a driver's license." Alex gripped the seat as Dr. Evan stopped at a light.

"Nope. Can't have one without proving who I am." Corbo said.

"What are you doing about identification?" Amber's mom asked.

"I have to legally prove I am here. That's why I have to marry Livia. The United States officials don't believe I was born here. No other country knows I exist."

Amber's map crinkled in her hand. "A man without a legal home, anywhere. Sad. School records should account for something."

"No. Even schools tie them to social security numbers. And without one, well, there are hundreds of people in this state with my name. Those records could belong to any one of them. As for working, no proof of who I am means I have to be careful about my jobs as well. A green card to stay would be the start. Dr. Rebecca is trying to help me. Some provisions let her hire me, without documentation."

"How will marriage help?" Alex asked.

Dr. Evan lurched forward, narrowing missing a bike rider who whizzed in front of him against the light.

Dr. Rebecca answered for him, "Marriage will give him a reason legally to be here. He will have to begin the complicated process of legal immigration, once he is married. Livia is the only woman he has ever asked. Corbo isn't a bad person. An undocumented past scares most women off. Also, no well-paying job, no family, and no place to call home doesn't help in the search for a spouse."

"We're almost there," Dr. Evan said.

The gates of the Air Force base imposed order out of the chaos of streets, traffic, and people.

Alex could not imagine living an entire life in a country that did not accept that you belonged there. How empty, lonely, and defeating that must be. Corbo would have to face his fears as the

gates loomed ahead.

Corbo hid his face in his leathery hands, elbows resting on his knees.

"You weren't coming all the way, were you?" Alex asked.

He shook his head. "I was supposed to stay with the van at the rest stop. A few miles down the road."

"What will happen when they check our IDs?"

Corbo shook his head. "I don't have a green card. I shouldn't need one," he whispered.

Dr. Rebecca put her finger to her mouth to silence him as they pulled up to the guard shack at the base entrance.

"How many?" The soldier squared his gun across his chest.

"Eight," said Dr. Evan.

"Report says seven, let me verify."

They waited a few moments in silence.

"Please, leave your extra person here. They will be treated well. Not allowed to leave until you return."

Corbo gulped. He stood shakily and tripped out the door. He entered the shack with tiny windows. The door clanged shut behind him.

Alex couldn't see him anymore. He hoped he was safe, for Dr. Rebecca's sake, if no one else's.

Chapter 10

Kirtland AFB, New Mexico

Alex lagged behind as Dr. Evan ushered the group into the building.

The guard shack was almost out of sight down the road crowded by various unmarked buildings. Corbo would have to wait on them. If the meeting took too long, he might worry and fidget.

One exchange student Alex's parents hosted a few years before had lost his student visa. The emotional flurry, frantic search, and fear of the temporary family member, had never been forgotten. The house had been turned upside down. Mom and dad called multiple agencies to determine what the student would have to do to replace the identification card. The student had lost sleep, two days of classes, and a final exam, only to find the visa had been accidentally stapled to a term paper already handed in.

It could happen to Alex someday, while traveling and exploring volcanoes. He had to help Corbo. Maybe his dad would know something, when he returned to Hawaii.

All the unmarked buildings confused Alex. Soldiers stepped confidentially in and out of the each, so they must be able to remember which building served what purpose. Even the university labeled buildings. Maybe labels were a crutch he was too used to.

Amber held the door for him.

Alex caught up and stepped inside the chilled building.

"Down that hall. How many eyes are watching us?" Amber smiled at him.

"Too many, that's for sure. Let's go!"

Amber's mom and a few other scientists sat near the projector. Her mom didn't notice them walk into the room late.

Dr. Rebecca answered the student's questions while shuffling printouts. Three stacks of papers partially hid the laptop.

"Here, place one of these at each seat." Dr. Rebecca handed a box of stapled pages to one woman.

Half the chairs were empty.

"Thanks for preparing these. They'll help." Dr. Rebecca turned back to the laptop and turned on the overhead projector. Pictures

flickered on the wall.

Another person jumped up, took half of them, and the students chatted as they passed out the pages.

The overhead projector screen paused on a giant state map on the wall with roads, cities, and mountains clearly marked.

Alex and Amber walked up to her mom.

"These are some of Dr. Rebecca's students and scientists from the university. They will be helping us present our findings." Amber's mom waved at the five people surrounding Dr. Rebecca. One woman looked up and smiled.

"That's good. Perhaps they know local lingo better than we do," Alex said.

"Or some of the base members," Amber said.

Alex and Amber sat down together a few chairs away.

Amber's mom smiled at them as Brandon handed her a cup of coffee.

Alex tried to guess the distance between places on the map by the amount of time it had taken to travel from their trailer to the base.

The door opened and four men in military uniform stepped into the room. Two more stood at the door and watched each other, as if they were statues. The four men walked to the front of the room, and stood with arms crossed, next to the screen.

"Hello Dr. Rebecca. I am Brigadier General Nord here at Kirtland AFB."

General Nord waved to the men following him, and introduced each of them.

Alex sighed. He'd never remember which name went to which person. Colonels West, Sands, and Springs, all looked the same. Bald, similar uniform, and identical blank expression. The names wouldn't matter as much as what they had to say.

General Nord waved his hand. "These other colonels, from nearby bases will be listening to your presentation. I hope what you have to share today is important. If not, you have wasted valuable time away from other projects." He ushered the other officers to seats, and stood, watching the screen.

Dr. Rebecca introduced everyone to the Colonels; including the other scientists and students from her university.

She pointed to the screen. "Here, we will first highlight all of the known dormant volcanoes in the region. There may be more hidden in the White Sands range, in places civilian scientists do not have access to. Do you have any military geologists who are able to

provide us with this vital information?"

"You will have to show us why it's necessary. Even so, no guarantees can be made that we can disclose that information." Colonel Sands stood straight and stiff. He expected the meeting to be short.

Dr. Rebecca nodded. "Okay, here is what we have. Underneath three formerly dormant volcanoes, the magma chambers have shifted dramatically since the last quake. In fact, I prefer to call it an event, since we are debating whether the ground shaking is in effect volcanic in origin, or an actual earthquake." She paused and waited for the information to sink in.

Dr. Rebecca pointed back at the map and the Rio Grande Rift Valley appeared on top of the visible features. "Here we have a unique situation. The eastern part of the rift valley has drifted further east in the last few events. The plates have shifted more at the southern end. With up to three inches of eastward movement in some locations. The northern end has split about an inch, as far as our measurements have been able to verify at the moment."

"Doesn't sound like much. What have been the official event magnitudes so far?" General Nord asked.

Dr. Rebecca pointed to each of the epicenters. "Up to now, they have been growing in number, frequency, and intensity at 4.5 three days ago, 3.2 two days ago, and 5.5 yesterday. Following the current trend, the next event is likely to be a 4.3 followed by a 6.0 or greater magnitude quake. That is enough to do damage and disturb a large portion of the population in the surrounding area as plates ripple further, and faster here than in mountainous regions."

General Nord rocked on his feet. "So far, these would all be considered minor events with minimal damage, little more than commonly occurs in this area. Other than the one yesterday. The 5.5 seemed more serious than I would expect locally."

"Yes," Dr. Rebecca said. "We are using the Mercalli intensity scale numbers, which slopes upward at a more gradual rate. A 6.0 on the Mercalli scale would do serious damage to a great many homes in the local region. Many walls would fall, and roads would buckle as the ground twists. Fortunately, this is a farming area. However, some schools, and the military bases could be in serious danger; since the major faults run right through them."

Dr. Rebecca nodded to Dr. Evan. She clicked a button and a picture of the Earth and its magnetic poles appeared.

Dr. Evan walked over to the map and said, "Here is where I step

in for a moment. The last event caused the magnetic poles to shift, throwing off compasses worldwide. The magnetic pole shifts in a small circle every day. Pilots and miners are used to adjusting to small changes. This wasn't a small change."

Worried faces stared back at him. People shifted in their chairs. No one spoke, so he continued. "We have no idea if the poles will maintain these new positions, move further away, or revert back to their previous positions."

"How does that affect us now?" General Nord asked.

"There is concern about further magnetic pole, and magnetic field, shifts. We need to be aware of the possibility. Shifts can affect climate, GPS, and have other unintended consequences to travel and communication."

One of Dr. Rebecca's students raised her hand.

Dr. Evan nodded to her.

"Will they do a total pole reversal? That would affect infrastructure, satellites, and compass readings."

Dr. Evan sighed. "We don't have any known recordings of this type of situation. None in the known written history of the world. Studies on pole reversals in rocks are not able to pinpoint why, or how they occur. As devastating to our lifestyles as it would be, such a reversal would be a breakthrough in understanding, if it occurred in our lifetime."

General Nord shuffled his feet and looked at the other Colonels. "It would affect satellites then."

"Satellites can shift changes quickly, if they are in the right place at the right time. A pole shift will cause delays of at least seconds, probably minutes as satellites realign world coordinates. More than that, we cannot guess. Magnetic compass readings will be off. Flight patterns, drilling, and communications, including telephone, internet, television, and radio will be interrupted. If the plates continue shifting, GPS units will be less reliable as runways, rivers, and roads shift and buckle due to the strain from quakes." He glanced back to Dr. Rebecca.

Dr. Rebecca picked up where he left off. "This goes beyond the volcanoes and Rio Grande Rift." She clicked a button, and all of the known New Mexico earthquake fault lines appeared on the map with the volcanoes dated to when they last erupted.

Even to Alex, the picture spoke more than words. For millennia, major volcanoes had danced across the state from the southwestern corner to the northeastern corner, drifting across the center in the

southern half of the state. Faults ran primarily north to south along the mountain ranges. The Rio Grande River, bowed like a half moon torn in two, down the center of the state.

Dr. Rebecca zoomed in to view the White Sands Missile Range. The Jornada del Muerto volcano rose to the west. The Range was centered between the Jornada and Alamogordo faults, with the San Andres splitting it in half. The Alamogordo ruptured the Sacramento Mountains less than 15,000 years ago, a blink geologically. The San Andres fault had formed over 130,000 years ago. The Jornada fault, and its relatives out west, split even further back in time.

The Jornada del Muerto volcano, between the Rio Grande and White Sands erupted a mere 760,000 years. If the hot spot had shifted at the same speed and direction as the other hot spots, it could be nigh the boundary line of White Sands. Another few million years, and it would be under the Trinity site. If, the current events did not speed up the process, and change the geology through buckling the plates.

Alex squeezed Amber's hand. The Jornada del Muerto wasn't the only volcano on track to re-emerge under a military base. Los Alamos might have a little more time to move. The Valles supervolcano hot spot was on a collision course with it. Maybe Livia's protesters weren't so far off base. If Valles, even where it is now, erupted; Los Alamos, and White Sands would be buried in ash, depending on wind direction.

Dr. Rebecca slid the map out a moment to show the whole country. Yellowstone nestled near the top of the screen. Feeder rivers just below it led to the Rio Grande, which flowed east of the Valles Caldera, and southward to form the west bank of the Jornada del Muerto lava flows.

Alex gulped. Earthquakes were not his specialty. A general knowledge wasn't enough to understand the scale of the dangers they all faced. The fault pattern looked like a crooked jigsaw puzzle, with too many tiny pieces too close together. Faults could slip further. Volcanoes could erupt, shoving the plates against each other. Perhaps they would release the pressure. Or, they might intensify the magma chambers. This could go back and forth for millennia, or maybe a month. After what Amber had said about Yellowstone last night, no wonder the military leaders were calling for help.

"General Nord," Dr. Rebecca said. "We do not have enough information about faults on any of the local military installations.

They are surrounded by faults along the western edges, and right down the center of White Sands Missile range."

Letting that sink in she walked back to the table. "Sirs, is there any danger; either to the bases, or the public, from buried nuclear weapons?"

The men shifted. They watched to see who would speak first.

Dr. Rebecca put her hands on the table and leaned forward toward them. "I realize you consider it a national secret, and are unable to tell us. You called us. We are here to help you. If one of those weapons is on an unknown fault line that slips, splitting a nuclear weapon in two, what will happen?"

The warmth drained out of Alex's face. A fault could effectively slice a nuclear warhead like a knife through butter. Any sudden jolt would rattle them if they weren't held fast. As the earth slipped, one part would move, while the other stayed in its original place. No amount of planning or protection could prevent, or withstand the crustal movements, especially if they rebounded from the combined quakes and volcanic eruptions.

The colonels shifted position in their chairs.

"I know," Dr. Rebecca said. "You cannot tell us. However, you may want to put your specialists on this, to decide the safest way to store them at this point."

She turned back to the map. "I can tell you, the ground has shifted around each fault line on this map. No piece of ground is in the same place it was a month ago. Until then, the movement hadn't changed much in recorded history."

Dr. Rebecca pointed to the San Andres Faults. "We do have some data on these faults. Most people think of the San Andreas faults in California when they see this fault group's name. Multiple faults with almost the same name are confusing. San Andre's faults are a danger to every person in this room, and every person in this state. Will they move more in the near future? We don't know. Based on the last few weeks? Yes. We have to be prepared."

Dr. Rebecca picked up a print out to hand to the Colonels and the General. "We need to be able to work with your specialists to protect ourselves, the bases in this heartland, the rest of the state, and the country."

She left the marked map on the wall.

General Nord said, "Can we have copies of your information?"

"Certainly. I have it all saved on a disk drive, the latest as of a few hours ago. The packets my assistants handed out will help as

well." She handed the General a thumb drive.

General Nord walked to the door. "The meeting is over for now. We will contact you if we need more information." The other Colonels stood and followed him out of the room, leaving the two escorts behind.

Dr. Rebecca turned off the machine and said, "Alex, it will be okay. We will do the best we can. Will you carry this for me?" She handed him a pile of papers.

Amber stared wide-eyed at the screen.

Had she seen the same thing he had?

Chapter 11

Kirtland AFB to The Valley of Fires State Park, New Mexico

Amber grabbed her laptop, and one pile of papers. One last glance at the screen showed the Rio Grande like a giant zipper that closed up the continent. If it unzipped from New Mexico, the country, and the world, would never be the same. She needed Karen now. Karen would tease her in their history teacher's voice about always seeing the worst, and never the best in people, and events.

Dr. Rebecca turned off the projector and packed it in a bag.

Eyes unfocused, Amber turned and followed Alex out the door.

Her mom and Brandon already sat in the front of the vehicle together. Just this once, what she wanted more than anything, was to nestle next to her mom and pour her heart out, like she had when she was six, and dad disappeared.

Several of Dr. Rebecca's students laughed behind her.

Amber lifted her head and climbed in beside Alex. She sat as close to him as she dared, hoping the minuscule contact would prevent tears from forming.

Karen would have laughed it off, and they could have whispered to each other, to control and analyze the situation. Should she open up and tell her mom once they started?

Dr. Evan would have to drive them back to camp, and she didn't know him. Best to wait till they were back to camp and alone together. Mom would listen then, and know what to do.

Alex reached for her hand and tried to smile.

"Hope the guards didn't ask Corbo for his identification," Alex said.

"I hope not as well," Dr. Rebecca said.

Dr. Evan started the vehicle. "I know the guard. Unless Corbo said or did anything stupid, he won't ask."

"That hour meeting must have seemed a month to him," Alex said.

Dr. Evan drove the vehicle to the guard shack.

Corbo stepped out grinning. He walked up as Dr. Evan parked for him to join them.

"Hi everyone," he said. "Glad you came back when you did. Livia is threatening to come rescue me." Corbo climbed into the back of the vehicle.

"Corbo when did you find out about your legal status?" Alex asked.

He looked up at Alex. "A few years ago. I finished school and tried to find a job. Migrant work wasn't for me. I wanted a stable life. Without a social security number, I didn't have a chance. One man offered me some advice, and even a couple of days pay under the table. Enough he said, for me to find another place to go."

"He did more than that," Dr. Rebecca said.

"Yes." Corbo twiddled his fingers. "He sent me to you. Since you work for the university, you could find a way for me to be here legally, he hoped. We found complicated a way. I sometimes wish we hadn't."

"You don't have much of a Spanish or Mexican accent," Tom said.

Corbo laughed dryly. "Yeah, that's part of the problem. I don't know much Spanish. I was never allowed to speak it at home, or learn it at school. My father threatened to whip me if he heard I was speaking in Spanish."

"That's horrible!" Amber said. "Why would they want to deny you your culture?" Many migrant workers lived and worked in California; did they live in fear as well?

Corbo turned toward her. "It gets worse. Shortly before I left home, I heard my younger brothers speaking Spanish. My parents ignored them, until they saw I was standing in the doorway. Then, my father yelled at them. Later, when he thought they were alone outside, I heard him say they could speak all the Spanish they wanted. Though, not in front of me."

"Did he ever say why?" Amber asked. Something about his story didn't make sense. It shouldn't be okay for his brothers, and not him.

Corbo nodded. "Once he said I had a better chance in life if I never knew Spanish. I might be able to find a better job. I guess they saw being Mexican as what held them back."

"Didn't they speak Spanish?"

"They must have at one time. They have the accent. Every now and then, mom would let out a few words that were Spanish, or maybe her Native Indian heritage. They never even talked about the Middle American Indian group our family comes from. I don't know who I am."

"Shame is a terrible game," Dr. Rebecca said. "It makes people do strange things. Shame, fear, and politics all do. I think you do have a good chance Corbo, and soon we will make it all work out."

"Did you ever go to a driver's license branch Corbo?" Alex asked.

"Once. I didn't know I needed a social security number. Before I had a chance to say anything, they pointed me to a line for Spanish speakers. I was laughed at there, as I didn't speak any Spanish, and had no idea what they were saying. I was so embarrassed. I left and never went back." He closed his eyes and lowered his head.

Corbo twisted his hands. "Sure, like every kid here, I know a few basic words. I can never be sure they mean what I think they do. For some reason, I tend to tune it out when I hear others speaking it. It's funny, people who know I speak good English, expect me to be able to translate for people who only speak Spanish. Embarrassing for them, and me."

"Do you like Livia?" Amber asked. He hadn't said much nice about her.

Corbo waited a few minutes before responding. "Hard to say. Basically, it's almost an arranged marriage in many ways. I don't really know her. And, what I've seen lately, I don't like. She's getting scary now."

"Do you want to back out?" Amber asked. Marriage without liking the other person would be miserable. In fact, marriage laws were what had kept her mom from remarrying when her dad disappeared. There had been no way to determine if he was alive, or dead. She was legally trapped in a marriage that didn't exist, and couldn't move on with her own life when Brandon's wife died.

"Yes. I think so. I don't think Livia's worth it. There has to be some other way. If only I could apply at the university as an exchange student. Without school records they won't consider me. Those I have, I can't prove are mine."

"What does Livia expect out of the marriage?"

Corbo laughed. "She thinks a lot of kids and family. Sure, I have parents and siblings. Livia won't know them. I don't talk to them anymore. I don't like the way they live. Kids are something I really don't want. I couldn't teach them who they really are, and they'd be as lost me." He paused and stared out at the scenery. "There is no way, or place, to raise kids in this barren landscape."

He glanced back at the group. "Her last call, I don't like it."

"What did she say?" Amber asked. Her hands gripped her laptop

case handle as Dr. Evan rounded a curve.

Corbo took his phone out of his pocket. "She said her group wanted to picket the state capitol. They want the nuclear stuff to be moved away for the safety of the families that live here."

Dr. Rebecca glanced at Corbo. "She won't find a more remote, less populated area in this country. Though, a less seismically active area she might find. Even Alaska has earthquakes, many dormant volcanoes, as well as moving ice sheets. Not stable there either. Did she say when she was going to picket the capitol?"

Corbo shook his head and put the phone in his pocket. "No. I figure tomorrow, or the next day. She blames the military for the recent quake events. She doesn't see anything else."

"If she were away from them, maybe things would improve," Amber said.

"How could we do that? They like her more than her parents do," Corbo said.

"Not a bad idea, Amber," Dr. Rebecca said. "Maybe she can join Alex and Tom. They might mellow her out."

"Not if she's girly, please," Tom said.

Laughter floated through the vehicle.

Chapter 12

The Valley of Fires State Park, New Mexico

Scenery sped by on the interstate. Before too long, they saw Dr. Rebecca's van on the side of the road, with a tow truck hooked up to it. The back end squashed, and the front dented, it wasn't going anywhere on its own soon. Traffic had cleared.

The scenery reminded Amber of many places she had been with her mom. They had always been close. Now, distance grew between them, though they were only feet apart.

Dr. Evan reached their camp with no trouble. No sign of Livia or her group of protesters on the road, or in the park.

Amber stepped out of the vehicle. Nothing appeared out of place. A few minutes to herself would be nice. Perhaps mom would come looking for her. She walked around to the sleeping quarters and unlocked the door. Warmth pervaded the trailer. No time for a refreshing nap. Time to sort through her backpack, and decide if anything could be left out to keep the weight down the next day. Everything she had would be needed, though not every moment.

They may be here for a while, and a weekend's worth of clothes would mean extra washings. If she kept everything with her, it wouldn't be lost. Karen's picture connected her to the stability she had grown up with, even as she traipsed active fault lines around the world. She pulled out the "Ring of Fire" pillowcase, trying to decide if it was safe to leave it on the bed.

The trailer shook.

It rocked and swayed.

Dishes crashed off the counter in the kitchen area.

The bed shook violently, nearly throwing her to the floor. She balled up the relic pillowcase in her hand, and stuffed it back into her bag.

The front door banged.

"Amber, are you alright?"

"Yes, Mom. I'm sitting on the bed."

"Don't move then. It should be over in a minute."

The wave rolled right through her. Similar to how loud music vibrates through the body, when a car goes by with its stereo turned

all the way up.

The shaking slowed until the vibration could no longer be felt.

Amber slung her backpack on and hurried to the door.

Her mom stood outside, checking the scenery.

Trees shook as branches and leaves settled back into position. Some limbs and leaves covered the ground at their bases.

"Come on. Let's go make sure no one fell."

They rushed across to the open back door of the other trailer.

No one was visible inside.

They rushed through to the front door, opened it, and searched for the group. They were on the ground about thirty feet away.

"Is everyone okay?"

"I tripped and have a tiny cut. Otherwise, I'm okay," Alex said.

Dr. Rebecca clutched her phone. "Guess we better check the computers and see how close that one was. It was strong."

Sirens blared in the distance.

Amber walked to her computer and dropped her bag beside it. She logged in to one site. The screen buzzed with activity. "Preliminary reports are saying a 6.3 at the Magdalena Peak." She turned to Dr. Rebecca. "It may be higher. The observatory is offline."

"It's worse," Tom read from his screen. "The interstate we were on a few minutes ago shifted." His pale face turned to Dr. Rebecca.

Dr. Rebecca stifled a cry and grabbed her phone. She pushed the buttons and waited. "No cell reception. I hope Dr. Evan is okay."

"There's a lot of damage. We'll have to access the data as it comes in." Tom pecked at the keyboard.

"Tom, let me set up one site, then you will have all the emergency responder information as it comes in. We need it real time, not the filtered stuff that the news puts out afterwards to prevent panic." Dr. Rebecca pushed him out of the way and logged into three sites on his computer.

The ground readings continued to shift on Amber's screen. Once it settled the deformation rates would mean something. Amber waited. "I'm not sure I would want to see how much the land has changed."

"In some places, you wouldn't notice it. In others, the ground would be so different that if you had known every inch of the area, it would appear to be a totally new place." Dr. Rebecca speed typed on Tom's computer.

"Dr. Rebecca, what if our equipment fails?"

"If it does, then we are back in time. We'll be fine. Corbo has a

supply of both firewood and food set aside if such an event happens." Dr. Rebecca said.

"Others probably don't," Amber said as she checked another site.

"Most people will have access to at least a few days' worth of food, well water, and a grill."

"The well water could be contaminated though," Alex said. "I do know that."

Dr. Rebecca closed her eyes. "That would start a panic. The governor has to approve notifying the public of anything this serious."

Dr. Rebecca walked over to the counter. "Corbo, we will have to face Livia once again. She wants what she thinks is best for the people. Call the governor's office and Mr. Spike, head of the local mining regulation group. We need to meet with them as soon as possible."

"We don't have a vehicle." Brandon said.

Dr. Rebecca's phone rang, and she grabbed it. "Dr. Evan, are you okay? Good, come back here then. We need you here more than anywhere. See you as soon as possible."

She turned to the group. "He stopped when the ground shook. The interstate shifted in front of him. He thinks he could drive through. The risk is too great to continue." Dr. Rebecca turned to Brandon and Amber's mom. "General Nord has ordered him to return to us and stay here until morning."

"We have lots to do then. Let's keep busy until Dr. Evan arrives. Who knows how bad some of these roads are," Amber's mom said.

"His vehicle should be fine for the terrain," Alex said.

"Sure, that transport vehicle may be fine. He'll have to dodge all the other vehicles that were stranded, shifted, or on moved sections of roadway. It'll be a minefield of cars and scared people on the interstate, especially since rush hour started about ten minutes before the quake." Amber's mom placed her coffee cup beside her computer.

Amber wanted a chance to talk to her mom. Now though, Dr. Rebecca needed her to sort the data. There wasn't time.

She blinked as the words and numbers blurred on the screen.

No time for emotion. Time for facts and hard work. Adult work was interfering with her thoughts and emotions in way she never expected.

One screen filled with the numbers of the current location.

Alex touched her arm.

She glanced up.

He nodded.

She opened another window. A background search on Yellowstone and the areas local to it could run at the same time. It would slow her main search down, so she'd have to toggle between screens. She had to put the numbers in correctly to run the simulator accurately. One mistake, and it would be wrong. Her hands shook as she slowly typed each number, verifying it was correct.

No point in worrying mom or Brandon unless they had the facts in front of her. If she and Alex were overacting, Dr. Rebecca might send them home. They couldn't take time away from events at hand. If they thought Yellowstone was involved, one of them would have mentioned it.

"Want some chips?" Alex asked.

Amber nodded.

Food would at least keep her hands busy as her heart pounded waiting on the reports to complete.

Emailing Karen might be the next best thing to talking to her in person. Karen knew all the same contacts she did. And someone researching in a less rattled area would help their cause.

Chapter 13

The Valley of Fires State Park, New Mexico

Alex filled a tray with tea, chips, and cookies. Someone really needed to cook a solid meal for energy to work on. Too bad Livia wasn't here, her deli experience would allow her to cook for the hungry crowd of scientists. If mom were alive, she'd find someone locally in a heartbeat. In fact, she probably had known someone at Dr. Rebecca's university who would be glad to help.

Classical music filled the air as Dr. Rebecca's phone rang. "Hello. Yes. Sure."

Alex carried the tray to Amber and Tom.

Amber reviewed Dr. Rebecca's notes. More data filled the screen, as the readings continued to shift. The computer was programmed to find certain associations with combinations of the data. Normally, they projected from centuries of data in the past, forward to centuries in the future.

Amber worked with the data to restrict it to showing only the next few hours, then days, and finally weeks. Her face grew paler and paler. She checked and rechecked her notes, fingers shaking.

"It can't be right," Tom said.

The map showed massive changes in the shape of the continent. Luckily, it was the lesser populated central regions which showed the most change. Days, or weeks, wouldn't be enough time to evacuate. Some would choose to stay behind no matter what. This simulation program hadn't been proven to be accurate to the day, week, year, or even decade. What the program showed, could create a panic that would never be forgiven, if it was wrong.

Alex sat the tray down. "It can be. We hadn't said anything yet, we wanted to check the data first."

The screen blinked red and green.

"What! What did you say?" Dr. Rebecca shook her phone. "The connection is gone."

The overhead lights flickered off.

Dr. Rebecca's phone slid out of her hand, and onto the table. "Oh no."

The computer screen faded.

"Save what you can! Back up batteries aren't fully charged."

Amber hit save, as her screen faded out.

The loss of the data was bad. There hadn't been time to print it, and no one would believe them without seeing and duplicating the simulation.

Amber shook.

"It's okay, we'll redo it." Alex handed her some hot tea.

"The circuits are overloaded. Corbo go check it!" Dr. Rebecca wrung her hands.

Corbo rushed out of the room to the electrical boxes in the back.

"Who was on the phone?" Amber's mom asked.

Dr. Rebecca shook her phone again. "General Nord called back with some details about who he wanted to invite to the next meeting. It cut off. Check your phone, Claire."

Amber's mom opened her phone to check. "No bars. Nothing."

Amber grabbed her phone and checked it. No connection.

Faces drawn, the group waited on Corbo and the power to return.

"Cut off from the world," Tom said.

Brandon walked to the window and opened it. "We'll need air. We've been without power in the field for days sometimes. Many aren't used to living without it, and won't be happy."

"That quake could have damaged something at the power plant, or caused an accident that took out a power pole somewhere. There's no way to know at this point." Tom picked up his notes.

Dr. Rebecca picked up her coffee cup. "We've been so busy studying the quakes we forgot to think about what else might happen. I thought it best to be in the field, near the events, not far away waiting on data to pour in. I hope one of the other teams can pick up our data if they realize we are offline."

Amber's mom walked to the kitchen. "Guess we better clear the fridge of food. All we can do is wait and see what was damaged, and how badly. We won't lose data being transmitted to the satellites from the latest quakes. It'll still be there when power comes back."

Dr. Rebecca closed her notebook. "I'll have Corbo start the small generator. It won't run the computers for long. A powerful generator might be stolen, so they only gave us a tiny one, thinking we wouldn't need it. We should be able to have some coffee and wait, until Dr. Evan arrives anyway."

A car screeched to a stop in the parking lot.

Alex ran to the open window. "Whoever it is doesn't look happy."

"Oh no. It's Livia," Dr. Rebecca said. "We don't need her drama right now. I need Corbo's help."

Corbo rushed out the back door toward her, talking as much with his hands as his mouth. His arms waved in the air.

Red-faced Livia shooed back at him. She waved him toward the trailer, and pushed him back toward them.

Alex laughed. Corbo and Livia were so alive in this moment of electronic disaster. Nothing could quail their communication. They talked while Livia reached back into the car.

Amber walked up beside him. "They won't like us watching."

Alex turned away from the window. "We need to find out more about them to help them. Maybe they can help us more than we realize."

Amber's mom opened the freezer. "Dr. Rebecca, is there a grill for the hot dogs and hamburgers? I could try to set a pan nearby for the baked beans as well."

Dr. Rebecca joined her, "There should be a whole campfire cooking kit around here somewhere. Used to use it with students at night, when four or five hours of checking data seemed like a long day."

She scrambled through cabinets, pulling out pans, printer paper boxes, and even a few trowels.

Corbo opened the door.

Livia walked in. "Sorry everyone. I was upset that I couldn't reach Corbo."

Dr. Rebecca stood up from a bottom cabinet. "Hi Livia. You might as well join us. We aren't sure how long we will be without power."

She shifted through another cabinet. "Corbo can you help me find the camp stove and pans? Did you put them somewhere?"

"I think they are in the back room with your filing cabinet." Corbo walked down the hallway.

Livia pulled one of the chairs away from the table and sat down.

There had to be a way to convince her to talk. Alex wanted to know if she was as bad as Corbo said. He pulled a chair up and sat near her.

Tom pulled his chair over. "Livia, tell us about yourself."

Livia tapped her feet and fiddled with a pencil. "I don't have much to say about me. I am going somewhere, busy all the time."

"What do you enjoy?" Amber asked.

"Enjoy? I don't have time for fun. I have lots of work to do." Livia

glanced at the ceiling.

"For who?" Alex asked.

"For my family of course. They expect all of these great things of me."

"What do they expect?" Alex reached for the tray of snacks and offered a cup of tea to Livia.

She refused. "No, idea. They say they believe I can do anything I set my mind to." Her hands trembled in her lap.

"Did they point you in any direction?" Alex asked.

Livia glanced up to him looking right at her.

Amber drank some cooled tea.

"No. They are too busy running their deli. They never see me. Or hear what I say. It's always, 'We are sure you are doing well.' What can I do?"

Amber reached out to her. "What do you want to do?"

Livia glanced at her, and gaped. "I."

"Here are some candles," Dr. Rebecca interrupted. "We won't light any right now. Unless anyone wants coffee, we will save the generator for morning. The temperature will be okay, at least until nightfall."

Amber's mom sat her notebook on the counter. "I made a pot of coffee before the power went out. We better all enjoy a cup while we can. Perhaps, Livia and Corbo could walk up to the park entrance and see if anyone has any news from a short wave radio."

Corbo nodded. "I can go. Livia do you want to walk with me?"

Livia tapped some pencils on the desk and ignored the group. She shook her head and stared at the ceiling.

"He'll be back soon," Dr. Rebecca said. "Have something to drink."

Livia reached for the cup of tea.

Corbo took her hand, and kissed it. "Don't worry."

Alex turned away. If Livia had a tear in her eye, he didn't want to know.

The chair bumped Amber's full backpack, knocked it over, and spilled its contents.

Alex helped Amber pick up the mess he had made. At least she was friendly. Corbo's assessment of Livia might not be far off.

Chapter 14

The Valley of Fires State Park, New Mexico

Amber fingered the pillowcase in her lap.

The door banged shut.

Tires crunched on gravel.

She slipped the pillowcase into her backpack, zipped it shut, and followed Alex to the window.

The transport vehicle parked away from the door. Dust covered dents in the doors verified the drive back had been less than gentle. One tire landed in a mud puddle. The water to the trailer must have sprung a leak.

Corbo crawled out from under the trailer covered in mud.

"Had to fix the leak. Think I have it turned off."

Dr. Evan nodded and pulled a box out the vehicle.

"General Nord had a short wave radio in the vehicle."

"Good. Dr. Rebecca sent me to find out if the ranger station had heard anything. I hadn't made it there yet." Corbo took the radio box.

Together, they walked back to the trailer.

Dr. Evan opened the door.

Corbo stepped in and sat the radio on the counter between the computers and the kitchen.

"Let's keep the radio covered up when we aren't using it. Wouldn't want it stolen." Dr. Evan said. "Guess I'm here tonight without provisions or clothes."

"I might have something you can borrow," Brandon said.

"Any news?" Dr. Rebecca asked.

Dr. Evan turned the dials of the radio. "Not yet. When the radio beeped, it sure scared me. When everything went quiet, General Nord paged it to go off. He told me he lost contact while talking to you. His directions are to rest up here tonight, and leave soon after dawn. It'll be dark before long. Hopefully the electricity will be back on, and there won't be any looting."

Amber shivered. They had all seen looting on television. It always seemed like someone else's problem. Something the town, or their government, had brought on themselves.

To clear her thoughts, she walked outside. A small bench under

a tree nearby would be a good place to think.

A few minutes later, Alex came out and sat beside her.

She ignored him as she viewed the barely altered physical landscape.

"I don't want to scare you. You shouldn't go off alone." Alex picked up a stick and pointed at the shrub brush.

"Did my mom tell you I do that?" Amber glanced up at him.

"No." He reached for her hand. "It's common for intellectuals to explore alone. We have to have space to contemplate. At least, I think so. Who knows what dangers lurk in the park. If you wander off alone anything could happen." His eyes peered into hers.

Amber pulled back and nodded. "I need to think."

She picked up a branch and drew circles in the mud near her feet.

She drew a big circle at the top, another big circle near her feet, then a small circle next to her shoe. A line snaked between them.

The trees and landscape looked almost the same as the day before. Underneath, it could be a different story. If quakes and power outages continued, the military couldn't keep the secret much longer. The population would know something wasn't right and demand answers.

Scenes from movies and news shows played in her mind. Actions fed off of actions. Scared people acted without thinking; while those who should have acted reacted out of fear.

Fear of the people, and for the people, so often led to inaction. Sometimes, inaction was the right answer. Other times, people, thousands of people, died due to inaction. If the reports she had seen were what was happening, there really was no answer. Millions of people could die. There had to be something she could do to save people.

"Alex, it's bad. What do we do?"

Alex took her hand. "If the power hadn't gone out, we could have printed that report, and convinced Dr. Rebecca. Without her approval, no one will believe us."

Amber tried to draw the outline of the southern half of the United States. Another documentary flashed through her memory. Tiny dots lined below the state outlines. "These quakes will affect the oil refineries if they become any stronger. If we don't do something soon, there won't be gas to power vehicles to transport people to safety."

Alex closed his eyes. "Dad faced such tension when he traveled

to remote countries to study erupting volcanoes. It was always temporary though. Our country always sent relief until they could be back up and running."

Amber stared at her crude drawing. There'd be no one to send enough relief to them. Unless the whole world tried at the same time.

Alex drew a line through the mud puddle. "If we stay inside, it'll stay warmer longer tonight."

"We'd all have to go to the other trailer, since that's where we'll sleep."

"True. Maybe we can find a way to convince Dr. Rebecca without the report."

Amber stood up and walked to the brush pile nearby.

A mouse ran out and away from her.

Sharing a room with Livia didn't sound near as fun as Karen. She couldn't connect with someone who stared at ceilings and didn't like Dr. Rebecca. "Mom will probably make me share my room with Livia. What do you think of her?"

"I'm not sure she knows what to think of herself. My room will have Tom and Corbo. All four adults will be in the other two bedrooms. Your room isn't bigger than a closet though."

"All of us together will provide body warmth to ward of the desert chill, like our ancestors. At least we don't have any luggage to take up space." Amber smiled up at him.

Alex stood up. "I don't think we'll all sleep in the living area. Isn't enough room there either."

Amber smiled. "Not even a couch to stretch out on."

"Let's go back in. Tomorrow we have to be ready for a more intense meeting, if we can make it back to Kirtland. We have lots of work we can do before dark."

Chapter 15

The Valley of Fires State Park, New Mexico and The Little Italy Deli

The following morning the sun peeked through the tiny window in Amber's room.

Livia slept, taking up as much of the cot style bed as she could.

Amber grabbed her bag, and tiptoed into the living area. At least by sleeping in her clothes she was ready to go. She pulled out a map to review the local geologic formations. From memory, she marked the recent changes.

She picked up her phone to call Karen to verify her notes.

No phone reception. There hadn't been an answer to her email before the power went out either.

The pages and notes slipped out of her hands and onto the floor. Karen wasn't there to point out errors, and add context to her understanding anymore. Certain aspects Karen knew far better than her. As a team, they'd always complemented each other. She'd have to become more familiar with Karen's specialties while going it alone.

Without phones and electricity, Karen, the internet, and all her usual resources didn't exist. Memory reliance practiced in the field meant she had a chance, though no way to double check her facts. She pulled her thoughts together and picked up the pages to mark the changes from the latest reports before the computer turned off.

Maybe where the meeting was going to be would have electricity, and they could dig up a few last minute reports. Of course, Dr. Rebecca probably already thought of that, and had her students working through the night to sort them, and bring them to the meeting. She had called General Nord on the short wave radio the evening before.

Amber and Alex had decided not to mention to Dr. Rebecca or her mom their findings. Both were too worried already. Alex had said he'd call his dad as soon as he could.

Brandon and Dr. Evan walked in.

"Good morning. Did you bring the sunshine in?" Brandon asked.

"No." Amber closed the brochure. "It is pretty, though. I have

most of the changes documented on here."

"Good. Your mom and Dr. Rebecca will be ready to go soon. Guess I better wake the young men."

Amber stretched. "Guess I should wake Livia."

"Let her sleep." Dr. Evan started down the hall, then turned back, "No, we better not leave her here. Not safe for her, or us."

Dr. Evan reached the door and knocked. No answer. He opened the door and turned back to the living area. "They're all gone. Amber did you see, or hear them leave?"

"No. Where could they be?"

"I'll check the other trailer. This is not the time, or place, to explore without notifying each other. Brandon, you tell everyone here to be ready to go. It's going to be a long difficult ride."

Amber hurried to wake Livia. They had been up as late as the sun shone discussing plans for the meeting today. Sleeping late didn't make sense on such an important day. "Come on Livia, we have to go."

Livia had sprawled out across the twin-sized bed.

"Alex, Tom, and Corbo aren't here."

Livia's eyes jerked open. "Where are they?"

"I don't know. Come on."

They hurried out of the trailer. They couldn't have gone far. There was no reason for them to go anywhere anyway, except to prevent the toilets from overflowing.

"Alex, Tom, Corbo, where are you?" Dr. Evan called.

Amber ran around the work trailer with Livia right behind. Alex had warned her last night not to go off alone, and then he did it himself.

Dr. Evan met them at the transport vehicle. "They've been in the work trailer, not sure when. A burnt down candle was left next to Tom's computer. Not lit of course."

Bushes crackled.

A rabbit scurried across between them and the trailer.

Dr. Evan and Brandon turned to the sound.

Tom strolled into the clearing followed by Corbo and Alex.

"Sorry," Tom said. "We planned to return before everyone woke. We had to retrieve some of the data from the closest equipment we set up the second day." He held out his backpack. "It's full of reports."

Dr. Rebecca sternly said, "You could have been hurt or killed by scared people or wild animals."

Corbo opened the transport vehicle door. "Alex and I each have a gun and plenty of ammunition. It would take more than a wolf pack to kill us."

Livia glared at him and marched to the vehicle.

Amber followed and sat midway back. Her backpack rested between her knees.

Alex slid into the seat beside her.

She glared at him.

Alex adjusted his pack. "Sorry. Didn't want to wake Livia, or you could have come along."

"Did you sleep enough to be able to present today?"

"I'll be fine." He leaned back.

Tom handed one of the print outs to Alex.

Dr. Evan started the vehicle. "This trip may be dangerous. I brought the radio, in case we become stuck and need it. Don't mention it if we are stopped. While we don't want to think about weapons, I'm glad Corbo and Alex each have a gun."

Alex motioned to his pack. "While not much of a shot, I can scare someone."

Dr. Evan nodded. "People become scared and dangerous when the ground moves, and the power goes out. A stick, or almost anything, could become a weapon for, or against us. We may need protection soon, if things don't improve. The communities are beginning to take notice of the quakes." He started the vehicle.

The road was smooth and clear, no signs of devastation, or a reason for the power to be out. Grass and weeds grew along the edge, and small rocks littered the ground.

"We have about sixty-five miles on this interstate. Not much has changed here. However, before we reach the river." Dr. Evan's voice trailed off as he steered the vehicle onto the interstate.

Trees and brush had fallen around a trailer in the middle of a field. Desolation and emptiness hid possible signs of damage while the vehicle moved at highway speed. Buildings showed signs of wear and tear from the stress of repeated quakes. A few teetered, and roofs had slid on old barns. None were close enough to check for cracks in the walls or foundations.

Amber checked her phone. An area with electricity and cell phone coverage would ease their concerns. As of late last night, there had been no official word on the cause of the power outage, or its extent. Of course, since anyone with a radio could listen, they had been careful with their communications with General Nord's

assistants.

Dr. Evan steered the vehicle carefully, giving them a chance to observe the landscape. "Here's the last fourteen miles to the interstate change now. The road is worse. Visible road deformation begins about ten miles away. I have to slow down. Corbo, Tom, Alex, watch the sides and back. This military vehicle may draw unwanted attention."

"Dr. Evan?" Livia said, almost in a whisper.

He didn't acknowledge her.

"Dr. Evan, Livia has a question," Amber said.

"Well, young lady, speak up. I can't take my eyes off the road here."

"Can we stop at the next exit, and check on my parents? I haven't been able to reach them. They may be worried about me."

Dr. Evan steered around a pothole. "Dr. Rebecca, do we have time?"

Dr. Rebecca checked her watch, and sighed. "I suppose so. It would be a good idea to pick up some food, even if Italian isn't my favorite."

"Thank you," Livia said aloud. In a whisper to Amber she said, "I hope none of my friends are there."

Dr. Evan pulled off the interstate. The exit was a fuel stop frequented by people who worked on, or near, White Sands. The Little Italy Deli was a tiny establishment, next to a gas station. At least the "open" light was lit up. The electricity was on here.

"Sandwiches would be good." Amber said.

Dr. Rebecca opened her cell phone to check for connectivity. "Livia, you, Corbo, and Alex go on in. I'll send Amber in a minute with orders and money."

Amber slid her laptop case out of the way, and handed her backpack to her mom.

Corbo walked to the door, and held it open for Livia.

Alex followed behind.

One minute he seemed like a nice person. The next, he did things that annoyed her. Yesterday, he treated her like an adult. Today she was a pesky kid to be left behind.

Chapter 16

The Little Italy Deli

If only Amber would understand, he wanted to protect her. There was no need for her to hike all night to the equipment stations. They had to be sure it worked with only solar power. Even that might not last long, if the satellites didn't swing back around soon.

He followed Livia and Corbo into the deli.

Livia's parent's reaction to Corbo would clarify their true feelings for Livia. Maybe meeting her parents would help him know how to help Corbo.

"Hello Daughter!" The voice boomed as Livia walked in the door. "Glad you are okay. We worry about you. Come here. Come here. Who is this?" The man at the counter smiled and wiped the glass with a dingy rag.

Corbo followed slowly, with Alex right behind.

"Is this little big guy the one you have been telling us about? At least he looks healthy!" Livia's father patted Corbo on the back.

"Customer. Wifey! Wifey! Customer! I have found that if I shout 'wifey,' no one else answers. To her name of Anna, so many answer." A deep, hearty laugh followed this statement.

Livia groaned and lifted her hand to her eyes.

The door swung open and a small woman, noticeably similar to Livia stepped out. She glanced up from the basket she was carrying. It fell to the floor as her hands covered her face. "Eduardo?"

Silence echoed through the shop.

Livia's mother almost slumped to the floor.

Her father hurried around the counter to her. "Who?"

Her mother opened her eyes. "He looks like Eduardo, the one who disappeared before I met you. His hair and eyes are Eduardo's. Almost the same age as Eduardo was then."

"Come, sit, and tell the story. Always time for stories. Tension relievers." Livia's father shook as he led Livia's mother to one of the customer tables.

Livia and Corbo sat across from her.

Alex pulled up another chair.

Livia's mom gabbed Corbo's hand. "Tell me."

"I'm Corbo. I think I heard my mother say the name 'Eduardo' a few times, when I was really young."

"How old are you?" Livia's mom asked.

"Nineteen, a few days ago."

She nodded. "About the right age." She reached out to Livia's hand. "Eduardo, a professor, was my first love. I was sweet sixteen; and hadn't met your father."

The woman glanced up at Corbo. "He never led me on. I didn't know he was married. He came to me one day, and told me that he must go bring his wife, Adora, her sister, and her sister's husband here. His wife was due to have a baby in a month or more. So he wanted me to have a house set up, and be the babysitter."

She patted Corbo's hand. "Tell me about your parents Corbo. What is Eduardo like now?" She glanced up at him.

Corbo shook his head. "My dad's name isn't Eduardo. It's Jon."

"No, Jon was the brother-in-law's name."

Silence filled the store.

Corbo's shoulders shook.

"What happened? Did Eduardo ever come back?" Alex asked.

Livia's mom lowered her face. "I never saw him again. I kept the house ready for a long time. Livia, you were born there, after I met and married your father. Then, we moved here. I had forgotten Eduardo until now."

The door banged.

Alex glanced up. "It's Amber. Go on, tell us more."

Amber joined them beside Alex.

Livia's mother shook her head. "There is nothing more to tell. What can Corbo tell us about himself?"

Corbo stood; hands at his sides. His face stony and expressionless. "I, I don't know. So many things about my growing up never made sense. I wasn't at all like my parents or siblings. I left two years ago."

Alex placed his hand on Corbo's shoulder. "Do you know where to find them?"

"Maybe. Not today though. There's no time."

"Corbo, who does your birth certificate say your parents are?" Livia's mom asked.

He turned to her. "That is part of the problem. I don't have one. Or a social security card either. No proof I exist."

She gasped and covered her mouth. "Husband, find me my private box and the key."

Livia's father groaned as he lifted himself from the seat. He looked at everyone before he walked through the swinging door to the family quarters.

Livia's mom leaned toward Corbo. "I have copies of the papers for your mom, aunt, and uncle. He gave copies to me in case of trouble."

Corbo nodded. "If the ones who raised me are my aunt and uncle; where are my parents?"

No one answered.

The interior door swung open. Livia's father carried a box in. He sat the box down, and handed the key to Livia's mom. He glared at her.

Livia's mom opened the box. She pulled out a few things, and handed a sealed envelope to Corbo. "Here."

Corbo opened it and read silently. "My mom's name is Anna and my dad's name is Jon. This mentions them as his brother and sister in law. I never met Adora. It says he was to meet them and bring them through the border at. Wait, not there, not that date." Corbo covered his face.

"What? What's wrong Corbo?" Alex asked.

"My mom is terrified of that place. She said its name was never to be spoken in her house. Even my siblings couldn't say it. In school, we studied the major border skirmish that occurred there on the day Eduardo was scheduled to meet them. They could be among the unknown dead." He dropped the paper and scanned their faces. "Am I not who I think I am?"

Alex patted Corbo's shoulder. "We know your mom wasn't there."

"How?" Corbo said.

Alex smiled, "You are here. We have to find the people who raised you, and soon, to find the answers. Come on, we have a lot to do today. Dr. Rebecca and Dr. Evan are waiting." He held out his hand to Corbo.

This news from Livia's mom explained a lot of the inconsistencies in Corbo's story from the other day. He'd obviously never met her mom, so he hadn't made up the odd stories then, and she wasn't making them up now. He'd figure out a way to help Corbo, if there was one. Someday, when Mother Nature settled down.

Corbo held the page at arm's length. "Can I keep this?"

Livia's mom took it from him. Weakly she said, "Let me make you a copy, please. I'll be right back." She leaned on her husband a

moment before leaving through the swinging doors.

The bell rang as Tom walked in the front door. "Everything okay?"

Amber handed a paper to Alex, walked over to Tom. "Yeah. We'll tell you the story later."

Alex handed the food order to Livia's father. "Here sir, is the lunch request. Mine, Livia, and Corbo's orders aren't on here. Here is the money to pay. I am sorry for your confusion today. We didn't mean any trouble."

Livia's father took the paper and glanced at it as he sauntered to the counter. "What does my daughter, her chosen, and other friend, want?"

Amber leaned up against Alex for a second, and walked up to the counter.

Livia's father slammed the sandwiches together, glancing up at the group from time to time. No wonder Livia talked loudly and waved her hands. Her dad chopped at the sandwich bits as if he could chop the memory of Eduardo from his wife's mind.

Amber walked to the cooler to pick out a drink. "Alex what do you want to drink?"

Alex walked over and picked a bottle, handing it to her.

Livia's mother returned with the letter and a locket. She placed them in Corbo's hand, and clasped it closed. Then turned away, and hurried back through the swinging door.

As they left, Corbo took Livia's hand. "You don't have to come if you don't want to."

Livia glanced at him, and back at her dad, wiping the counter. "I should be with you. You'll need me." She stalked out the door with him following.

Livia's mom opened the door, wiped tears from her eyes, and smiled.

Amber, arms full of drinks, held the door for Alex.

Alex carried the cardboard tray of sandwiches for the scientists.

Livia's mom cared about her, and watched her close. And likely, her dad did as well. He didn't know how to show it under that rough exterior, like so many men. Not even sure I know how to show I care, Alex thought.

Livia might not be so bad, if somehow, she could find her mother's gentler side.

Chapter 17

Drive to Kirtland AFB, New Mexico

Amber munched her sandwich and tried not to think about the scene at the restaurant.

Livia's parents were calm compared to what might happen if Mother Nature kept rolling in her sleep. That thought made her smile. If Mother Nature went back to sleep, the quakes would stop, and the volcanoes wouldn't erupt. She could go back home to Karen soon, and beg her to travel with her, not stay in California with Jerry.

Soon after returning to the highway, they reached a line of stopped traffic. Dr. Evan inched forward for a mile before the reason became clear.

Police cars blocked the roadway. The police turned cars around and sent them back to go another way.

The vehicle nearly reached the front of the line. Dr. Evan pulled off onto the shoulder. He walked over to speak to the officers directing traffic.

Amber and her mom climbed out to examine the cracks and crumbled asphalt while Dr. Evan talked to the police officers. The roadside they were on was lower by about six inches, and the pavement had been shoved toward the right by about two feet. They couldn't see much movement here, other than the fracture in the road. They rambled off to the side, intent on studying the road deformation.

"We're so close to the river here. It will be hard on this part of the state." Amber pulled out her map and marked the deformation.

Her mom walked over to the median separating the two directions of highway. "Amber, come here and mark this too."

Amber narrowly avoided tripping over lose asphalt. She reached the side and stepped into the springy grass. Cracks in the ground showed signs of being more than tire ruts and summer drought. The ground was lower, almost a ditch, between the two highway ribbons. An unusual cone shape, as tall as she was, pointed to the sky. In some ways, it resembled pictures of Australian termite mounds. Something about it haunted Amber. It didn't belong here.

"Alex, Tom, come here," Amber shouted.

A policeman talked to her mom while Amber waited. "A car stalled as the quake happened. The road shifted, under the middle of the car. The tires didn't pop when he drove on up. He almost backed up and turned around."

Alex and Tom walked up beside Amber.

"The driver saw a plume of smoke, or so he said. He wasn't sure what it was. Ground seems sturdy enough, on the road anyway," the policeman said.

Amber pointed at the less firm, almost crinkle cut spot, and the cone. "What do you think?"

"Not sure. I need my pole. I'll be right back." Alex ran to the transport vehicle and came back with a long pole with a cup attached. He tested the ground with the bottom of the pole.

"Hey, Mr. Officer, there hasn't been any rain lately, has there?"

"No kid. Stay away from there. We don't know if it's safe." The police officer turned towards Alex.

Amber's mom stepped in front of the officer. "He's doing his job. The government called him to be their representative volcanologist. He has to determine if it's safe."

The officer stared at her, then back at Alex. "Okay kid. You look too young to know anything. If you hurt yourself, it's your own life."

One driver shouted that he couldn't turn around, he had to reach his wife in San Antonio before she had her baby.

San Antonio was around the bend and across the river. It should only be a few minutes' drive. There was no telling how far that driver would have to go to be able to cross the river safely.

The officer turned his attention to calming irate drivers and directing traffic.

Alex took a deep breath and walked forward as Brandon, Dr. Evan, and Dr. Rebecca came up to Amber's mom.

Amber stepped forward. She wanted to help.

Alex waved her back.

After a few steps, he stopped and tried to push the stick into the ground.

No recent rain meant the ground should be rock hard.

He was several feet from the mound. The stick went down several inches, and didn't meet resistance.

Alex turned back.

As soon as Alex reached the road he said, "Be quiet everyone. No loud noises. Tom?"

Tom lugged the COSPEC from the van.

Alex set it up quickly.

"I'm calling General Nord," Dr. Rebecca said.

Amber didn't want to listen to that conversation.

"We have time for a quick reading," Alex said.

Tom grunted as he turned the dials and shifted the machine around.

Several police officers gathered around them. One stayed behind to direct traffic. After what seemed a day; and could only be about twenty minutes, Alex faced the worried crowd. "The mound is a fumarole. Signs of carbon dioxide, sulfuric components, and other gaseous emissions are leaking out."

"Will it form a volcano?"

"Hard to say at this point." Tom packed the machine back up. "We have a lot to do. The meeting at Kirtland AFB is more important than ever now."

Amber gripped her cell phone.

Alex picked up the equipment and carried it toward the transport vehicle. "It might develop more. Or, it may let pressure off, keeping an eruption, and another quake from occurring. This one may let off steam and pressure, then disappear. It's difficult to say at this point."

"We aren't sure you can go on this way," one police officer said. "The bridges may not be in good condition. Inspectors haven't made it this far."

"We have to inspect as we go," Dr. Evan said. "Each deformation must be documented for our meeting. I'll go slowly when I can so they can take notes. Fast enough across the bridges to safely reach the other side."

One officer nodded. "I guess your vehicle is the safest it can be for such a trip. Good luck, and be careful out there."

Tom loaded the COSPEC back into the vehicle.

Amber settled into her seat, making notes as fast as she could.

Dr Evan backed up a few car lengths, to have enough speed to skip over the two-inch-high jagged bump. "Military tires shouldn't be damaged by the broken concrete, as long as no reinforcing steel punctures them. I'm not taking any chances." He wanted firm control, and not have part of a tire become caught on a chunk of asphalt, potentially sending the vehicle into the fumarole.

Across the split, the road appeared safe enough. It could change in an instant. The Rio Grande followed most of the state from north to south and appeared as a ribbon on the horizon. Amber's stomach fluttered. Crossing the river on an earthquake damaged bridge was

not the way she intended to celebrate summer vacation beginning.

"We'd better stop before the bridge," Dr. Evan said. "The officers said no one had been here to check its stability. Alex, bring your pole."

Outside the vehicle, everything appeared normal and safe. Appearances could be deceiving.

Alex's hands shook as he grabbed his pole. He walked forward and peered out over the great river.

This once beautiful, once swift moving river had formed after the rift valley that bore its name. Humans had dammed it in many places to prevent flooding. This caused the loss of many species that depended on the flowing waters. Without the annual floods, fish couldn't reach hunting and spawning grounds, and many plants could no longer reproduce naturally.

Yesterday, it placidly plodded along. Today, the waters churned, cliffs scarred by fallen boulders. Dust clouds billowed in the distance as more fell into the chaos. On this side of the river, the bank had broken back closer to the bridge supports.

Alex tapped the bridge with his stick. He took a level from his pocket and laid it on the surface where it joined the road. He shook his head.

Tom came forward with a rope and tied it around Alex's waist.

Corbo grabbed the other end. Both men held onto the rope, slowly letting it play out between their hands as Alex stepped onto the bridge. One step. Another step.

Amber held her breath. Alex wasn't giving into fear for his safety, and she never had either. She'd far rather be the one on that rope, showing she wasn't afraid.

Alex inched forward and tested the firmness with his pole. A few times, he stopped to check the level. At last, he was across. He examined the bridge supports for a few minutes, and started back, checking more areas along the way.

Tom and Corbo anchored the rope.

Amber ran over to roll it up.

Alex stopped two more times to retest the bridge level around the edges. At last, he reached their side.

"I think we can make it across. It seems sturdy enough. I don't see any cracks on top of the bridge. Better have the windows down in case. This side of the bridge is lower than the other side. I'm not sure if it was that way yesterday." Alex's knees wobbled. He sat down to drink some water.

"There are marks on the other side where the roadway appears to have shifted some. However, the ground underneath is stable, and under more of the bridge." Alex used his pole to stand up.

Dr. Evan nodded. "Moderate speed?"

Alex walked back to the vehicle. "Yes. Dr. Rebecca, they will need engineers out here to determine if anyone can safely use this bridge. I am not so sure I would want the public, or multiple vehicles, on it at one time."

She pulled out her phone to make the call.

Amber climbed back in.

Dr. Evan backed the vehicle up a couple of car lengths. "Better drive across quickly, before another a tremor."

The river glistened. No wildlife in sight.

Amber shivered as the vehicle reached the bridge.

The bridge swayed in the wind.

It groaned when they reached the middle.

Amber swallowed, holding onto the seat as hard as she could. She watched out the back window.

The back tires settled onto the road again.

The bridge surface appeared to bounce back up a little. Maybe it was an illusion as the heat of the day misted into steam off the surface.

Sirens wailed in the distance.

Police cars approached.

Dr. Evan stopped the vehicle.

"Did you drive across it?" The police officer peered inside.

"Yes." Dr. Evan rested his arm on the steering wheel, and turned his head out the window. "We have to study each deformation from here to the base. I wouldn't advise anyone else to cross it. The bridge is too wobbly. Maybe my imagination. I don't trust it."

"You've driven it before?"

"Several times; a few times in the last two days."

"Okay. We'll rope it off. Not many people are going far from damaged homes. There was a good bit of damage here in San Antonio. At least the power's on; in most places."

Dr. Evan pulled his head back in, and started the vehicle.

Broken bridges and loss of infrastructure would make population evacuation even more difficult with a lack of fuel. Amber covered her eyes, wishing she had the chart to show her mom and Dr. Rebecca. Then they could have shared it at the meeting today.

Maybe she could still have time to draw something.

She rummaged in her backpack for pencils.

Alex handed her one of his report pages. "Use this."

Amber tried to draw on paper what she had drawn the night before in the mud.

Dr. Evan hit a pothole, and the vehicle swerved.

Amber's pencil raced across the page, tearing it.

San Antonio, New Mexico teetered before them.

Chapter 18

Drive to Kirtland AFB, New Mexico over the Rio Grande and Through San Antonio, New Mexico

Amber clutched her paper and pencil.

The drive through town was eerie.

Residents swept broken glass into piles. Children wailed, and no one noticed.

People moved as if asleep, glancing from ground to building while walking. A few noticed them and held out their hands.

Amber pulled back from the window. They had no food or water to share.

Cracks in walls and foundations echoed the stresses they had endured one time too many in the last few days.

No other vehicles moved along the streets between the buildings.

A few minutes later, Dr. Evan paused. "A slight deformation here, though not much. Residents will bombard us looking for help. Examine it as I drive by."

A two-inch wide crack ran across the road. One side was higher than the other. Crumbled bits scattered along the street. Safe to drive across; uneven enough to trip a person when walking.

Amber wrote a note.

People noticed they had stopped. A few walked in their direction before Dr. Evan moved forward and wove through the debris filled streets.

Before long, they reached the interstate.

As soon as they pulled onto the interstate, other vehicles appeared. Trucks drove at almost normal speed, while leaving more room than usual between the big rigs.

A semblance of normalcy, for the moment.

Amber's stomach clenched and teeth rattled. If she was right, was it too late to save people? If she was wrong, would her mom and Dr. Rebecca send her home? At least then she'd be with Karen.

The road appeared smooth and safe.

After a while, the butterflies in her stomach settled.

No one had much to say, so she tried again to draw the picture.

The pencil kept slipping, making a mess on the page. Maybe there'd be time when they reached the meeting.

Livia's phone rang.

Amber tried to not listen to the heated conversation.

Red faced, Livia closed her phone. "Turning it off. My friends want me to tell Dr. Rebecca to make the military go away. I don't think she has that much influence."

"No, I don't. None of us here do. We may need their help before long." Dr. Rebecca said. "Let's hope people remain calm."

The traffic ahead of them slowed. Most of the trucks were turned off at the westward exit. Police allowed one or two trucks through northward at a time.

Dr. Evan drove up to where the policeman blocked the Los Lunas exit.

"Hello travelers. Out of uniform? Where are you going?"

"We have to return to Kirtland Air Force base."

"Well, sir." The officer rocked on his feet. "Bridge stability is being questioned. Those who are turning off at the next exit can travel onward at this point. Go west here, and you might can reach the base through downtown."

Dr. Rebecca spoke over Dr. Evan's head. "Sir, we are the people sent in to study and evaluate the dangers. We have to see how the event has deformed the land, and the bridges."

"Um, names please." The officer leaned back and stared at the military vehicle.

Dr. Evan recited the names of everyone except Livia and Corbo.

"The vehicle appears official. Let me call it in." He stepped away and spoke on his two-way radio.

Amber couldn't quite make out the words he said. She started her drawing again.

The officer turned back to the window. "Okay. You can go on. You will have to wait at the next exit though. No one is allowed through without military authorization. Wait there until an escort is on the other side of the bridge in case you have a problem."

Dr. Evan nodded and restarted the engine. "Thank you sir."

As the officer backed away from their vehicle, Dr. Evan drove forward. "It's only a few miles, and we will have to stop again. We may have to wait a while for someone to arrive."

"It may not be too long." Dr. Rebecca said. "General Nord has been aware of our location all morning, since we arrived at the deli."

When they reached the next blockade, Dr. Evan pulled to the

opposite side from the exit ramp to not block traffic.

An officer walked up to him. "Identification please?"

Dr. Evan handed him his identification badge.

"Okay sir. The convoy to assist you, and your team, has arrived. Please wait about five minutes before you proceed. They need to be set up in case the bridge collapses."

"Officer, is it bad?"

"Not sure. Bridge inspectors are beginning checks of all the bridges. There are only a few inspectors, hundreds of bridges, and not enough officers to block them all. It takes time. There are a lot of bridges down, or of questionable stability. As far as we know, no one has been across this bridge since shortly before the event."

"Okay. Thanks. Have a good day officer. Hope your work gets easier."

The officer smiled. "I'd rather be here than in the city right now. Most places have power, though not all of them."

Dr. Evan shifted the vehicle into park. "We didn't have power where we were this morning."

"At least you will have power at the base. Have a safe trip." The officer stepped back, waved, and turned to direct the incoming traffic.

The number of cars on the road surprised her. Some were emergency workers, trying to reach family, or jobs. Albuquerque was the largest city in the area, and probably hadn't slept in over a hundred years. Vehicles were its lifeblood, racing along the arteries that gave the town its name and purpose.

She tried to imagine what the landscape would look like if the Rio Grande spilt. East and west would crumble further apart. Transportation between the two would be nearly nonexistent. Families split down the middle, and unable to cross the river to each other until Mother Nature decided to rest, and humans could rebuild bridges between new locations.

"We could wait at the bridge. I won't argue with the officer. We'll wait a few minutes, then go on and hope no one follows us." Dr. Evan said.

After a few minutes, the officer who had spoken with them went to his car and started it.

Dr. Evan started up the transport vehicle.

The police car drove out of the way and let them through.

The traffic ignored them. Of course, they were in an official military vehicle, so not many would question them being allowed

through the barricade. If they had been in any other vehicle, all the other travelers would try to force their way through as well.

It wasn't far now. The map showed two curves before they reached the bridge. Of course, not every nuance of the road is visible on a paper map. Those curves could prove the most dangerous in a situation like this. After all, the driver wouldn't be able to see a sudden change on the other side.

Dr. Evan slowed as he approached the first curve on her map. He rounded the corner. The interstate was clear.

Amber's stomach churned the closer they crept.

At the second curve, Dr. Evan slowed down and took the center of the road. "Let's all be quiet as we pass over the next major road. We don't want people to notice us, and try to exit onto this road."

Cars moved on the major thoroughfare below. Police vehicles sat at each entrance and exit ramp to the interstate they were on. No turning back now.

Minutes later, the bridge spanned in front of them.

Dr. Evan stopped the vehicle.

Amber followed behind the others to survey the bridge.

A mile-long bridge crossed two canals and two sections of the Rio Grande. It appeared stable enough. There were some signs that things might not be quite right with it though. It tilted at an unnatural angle.

"Each of you, grab your bag and walk across, one at a time. We'll walk much of this next mile. Sorry for the inconvenience," Dr. Rebecca said.

Livia groaned.

Corbo reassured her.

"Guess the equipment has to stay in the vehicle. Can't lug it that far," Tom said.

Amber shouldered her backpack and stepped up to the bridge.

Brandon grabbed her arm, "No, not you first."

"I am the lightest. If I can make it, all of you can."

"We have no idea how deep, or swift that canal is," Brandon said.

"Dr. Evan, how deep is it?" Amber asked.

"Often deeper than the river through here. I think it is best if you test it out. Tie the rope around your waist first though."

Amber's mom nodded. "Be careful. Remember how to climb a ravine."

Tom walked up with the rope and tied it around her waist.

Her mom and Brandon hugged her.

Amber settled her backpack, took a deep breath, and began the walk. It was about ten car lengths to the other side of the first section of bridge. She focused on some scrubby trees on the right side of the road. As she walked, the bridge seemed to shift, or maybe it was a slight breeze. The asphalt was heating up, and it burned through her shoes. There was no sulfur smell. At last, she reached the other side, turned around, smiled, and waved.

At this point, the bridge was supported by a short stretch of land underneath. Then, another section of bridge. There was only a few more feet of rope, so they'd all have to make it to here, and then go on.

"Okay?" Dr. Evan mouthed.

Amber nodded, and untied the rope.

Tom pulled it back and prepared for the next person to cross.

The full bridge was over a mile long. Section one crossed a canal, and rested over land. If the bridge broke here, she could land safely on the ground, if stranded between bodies of water. She walked on to the next section marker to wait for everyone to cross.

Her mom came next.

As good a time as any to talk to her mom while they waited. "Mom, I'm worried."

Her mom hugged her. "I know you are dear. We all are."

Amber glanced back as Alex began the walk across the bridge.

"Before the power went out, I tried to print some maps. Dr. Rebecca's right."

Alex reached them and untied the rope.

"Alex saw it. I'm afraid the Rio Grande will split all the way up to Yellowstone."

"Are you sure you ran the simulation correctly?" Amber's mom asked.

Amber nodded.

"I saw it. It's not good. If we could have time to duplicate and prepare the report," Alex said.

Dr. Rebecca arrived.

"No one will believe you without it." Amber's mom glanced at Dr. Rebecca.

"We've got to try," Amber said.

"We will. Write down the sites and search order you used. Give me and Dr. Rebecca a copy. We can't bring it up at today's meeting until we run those reports."

Amber nodded.

At last, the whole group, except Dr. Evan had walked across.

He was on the phone. He closed his phone and waved them to continue.

"Okay, we will go on, and Dr. Evan will catch up. Drink some water, and we will walk two at a time," Dr. Rebecca said. "Stay one bridge section behind the pair in front of you."

Alex took Amber's hand, and they walked silently together. He tapped the bridge gently with his collection pole. Sound shouldn't bring the bridge down. They weren't taking any chances.

They reached the edge of where the bridge joined the river. Amber wanted to peek over and examine the sides and river below. Safety though, was in the middle of the bridge. She held up her hand to stop those behind.

Alex nodded and tied the rope around her waist again.

She edged toward the right side, so she could peer over the rail of the bridge to the river.

The water appeared to be flowing faster than the previous day. She had no way to measure it now, nor had she then. The water was muddy and full of swirling broken bits of construction, plant, and animal debris. She walked back to Alex. He untied the rope, and they walked onward.

As they reached the island in the middle of the river, she took two steps to the right side. The river flowed quite different from the day before. Instead of thin and muddy knee-deep water, it had changed. It swirled higher, lapping the bridge supports. She pointed toward it.

Alex followed her.

The pairs behind stopped and waited.

Some log debris, and a large cow carcass, had washed up against the eastern bridge supports, damming the eastern stream of the river. Water pooled upwards, and backed into the main channel. This section was filling up with water, and could become a problem if the western side clogged and dammed as well. She clenched her teeth.

The military vehicles were in sight now.

Alex let out a low whistle, and motioned the groups behind onward.

Amber and Alex strolled across the ponding river. A long bridge stretched ahead of them, then another canal.

As they reached the last canal, Alex grabbed her hand, and she

took a deep breath. They hurried as fast as they could, trying to prevent vibrations that could cause danger to the people behind them, and the structure of the bridge. At last, they reached the other side where the military vehicles waited on them.

Amber waved off the men who came toward her. A drink of water was all she needed. As soon as she caught her breath, she stepped toward the edge of the road and peered at the canal. The asphalt had slid across itself, causing a small hill in the pavement on the corner at this end.

An officer walked up to her. "It's a good thing you all decided to walk. We aren't sure if it is safe to drive across. The engineers haven't made it here."

Amber and Alex hurried into the shade beside the convoy of vehicles until the rest of their team reached safety.

Amber's mom and Brandon arrived. Both were exhausted and needed water. Corbo and Livia came next. Tom and Dr. Rebecca came last. They all stood, watched, and waited for Dr. Evan try to drive across.

At first, it seemed nothing was happening. The officer next to Amber was on the phone with Dr. Evan. "Go a little faster. Too slow might be worse on the bridge than too fast." He waited a moment. "Twenty miles an hour sounds good."

The van picked up speed. He was across the first canal. The first long span held.

Amber couldn't decide if the swaying was real, or a trick of the heat wafting off the pavement.

Dr. Evan reached the first river section.

The military vehicles moved off the road.

Dr. Evan centered the vehicle on the bridge.

He crept across the second part of the river. He didn't pause at the thin strip of land between river and canal. A loud crack echoed as he crossed the second canal.

Amber took a deep breath as Dr. Evan stopped right beside the team.

She and Alex rushed to the edge of the safe part of the road. The road remained visibly intact.

"It was the dam," an officer with binoculars said. "Look." He handed them to Amber.

She took them. The debris dam had burst loose on the second leg of the river. "Will it make those supports weaker?"

"No one can cross this road for now. We have problems like this

from here south. Our state effectively has the western third cut off from the eastern two-thirds. Won't last long though. If the river slows back down to its normal speed, bridge repairs can be made, and life can return to normal, in a few weeks."

Amber handed the binoculars back. As she entered the vehicle, she wasn't so sure life would return to normal soon.

Dr. Evan wiped his brow as they all settled back into their seats. "I don't want to do that again." He drove down the road toward the base.

The military escort followed.

Chapter 19

Drive to Kirtland AFB, New Mexico

Alex settled into the seat beside Amber. As long as there weren't any more bridges to cross, there shouldn't be any problems reaching the base.

Amber worked on scribbling her notes as the vehicle bounced along. Seat springs obviously worn out. The notebook slid across her lap again.

Dr. Evans swerved to avoid potholes and rocks in the road.

Alex leaned back. "Dr. Rebecca, do Corbo and Livia have clearance to be at the meeting?"

"Yes, Alex. I've managed to authorize them. And no, the soldiers won't say a word to him, since he's my assistant. As long as there is no trouble from Livia's friends."

"I haven't heard from them," Livia said.

The crowded streets from yesterday were far from deserted. Pedestrians and pieces of buildings crowded where vehicles had honked and blared the day before.

A line of military vehicles waited to depart the Kirtland AFB gate.

Full identification would be required of everyone entering. The guard glanced at Dr. Evan and Dr. Rebecca's identification. He counted heads, checked a clipboard, and waved them on.

Alex checked his watch. Not knowing the exact time of the meeting made him nervous. How could they know if they were early, late, or on time?

Dr. Evan parked the vehicle in front of the same building as the day before. Their escort had driven on around them, and disappeared amid multiple look-a-like vehicles.

"Guess we will wait out here?" Livia said.

"We can walk back to the guardhouse." Corbo took her hand.

Alex helped unload the equipment and supplies out of the transport vehicle. Laptops and a box of papers were all Dr. Rebecca had managed to fit into the vehicle.

General Nord approached as he and Dr. Evan finished stacking equipment on the curb. "I'll need the keys. The vehicle is needed elsewhere. You will meet with the mining committee in a few

minutes. Once we have some more reports, we will be in to join the meeting."

Dr. Evan handed him the keys. He picked up the box of reports. "Guess we are stuck here for a bit. Sorry if you had plans."

"Not really," Alex said. "If they want us to do our job, they'll have to provide transportation."

Dr. Evan laughed. He raced to catch the open door.

Amber leaned against a car with Dr. Rebecca beside her. A smile temporarily hid the worry lines forming on her brow. If only there were some way he could erase those worries. Maybe Dr. Rebecca could prove their research wrong.

Dr. Rebecca chatted with some of her students who handed her a box of papers.

Alex walked over carrying the laptops for Dr. Rebecca.

Amber picked up a smaller box and followed behind them. "More notes on disk. Plus, the latest on paper, lots of notes. I don't think they were looking for what we found though."

Dr. Rebecca closed the car door. "Okay, let's go in and meet with Mr. Spike, and his associates."

The chattering students rushed on ahead to hold the door open.

Dr. Rebecca waited until they were out of earshot. "No mention of what you found Amber. Sorry. There isn't time now to duplicate your results. We'll do it tonight, I promise."

As they neared the door she said, "After you put your stuff down, go take a quick break. We need everyone refreshed and ready to listen and share. See if you can find some coffee."

A woman in uniform came up beside her. "I can see to that. Is there anything I can help you carry?"

"I think we have everything. Coffee and a snack would be nice though."

"I'll call for a vegetable and nut tray after I show your group where the restrooms are."

Alex followed them into the building.

Amber was right beside him, which encouraged him. His arms were full, so he smiled at her.

She smiled back.

Her opinion mattered. Shy at times, and outgoing at others. Amber reminded him of someone. A person he knew well, and missed. Trying to pinpoint who it could be, he entered the conference room.

The people at the other end of the room stared at them as they

entered. One walked up to speak with Dr. Rebecca.

Alex placed the laptop cases near the screen and followed the woman who had offered to show them the way to the restrooms.

Once he was back, Dr. Rebecca nodded at him, and left the room herself.

The laptops booted up while he reviewed the stack of papers. For now, they'd have to focus on materials and data they did have.

The last event had caused multiple minor events. The Magdalena Peak caldera showed a greater deformation than yesterday before the power shut off. It didn't look good. He pulled out a sheet on the Aden lava flows. There were signs of activity there as well. A couple of new fumaroles had developed in several regions along the Rio Grande. His hands shook as he placed the paper on top of the stack.

Dr. Rebecca walked into the room and spoke to the small group clustered on the other side of the projector screen. "I apologize. Our satellite research station lost power. My university students brought the latest data, and I haven't had a chance to review it. I will need a few moments." She sat down, grabbed the box, and pawed through the pages.

The men and women Alex didn't know ignored him, and continued talking. At least he recognized the students from their last visit, although he didn't remember their names.

Dr. Rebecca skimmed her notes, and clicked though the information on the disks her students had brought.

Alex tried to make sense of the scenes as they appeared on the overhead projector.

"Okay, Mr. Spike, I think we are ready. General Nord said to go ahead, and record the meeting," Dr. Rebecca said.

The group of three men and two women walked forward and took empty seats at the end of the table.

"First," Dr. Rebecca said, "Let me ask you, have you seen any anomalies in your mining operations?"

They looked at each other, then at Mr. Spike.

"Yes, we have noticed a few small changes. The sulfur and GPS readings are changing. We have to evaluate daily, sometimes hourly, to determine if we should proceed with drilling. In a few places we have chosen to wait, and moved on to areas which are more stable," Mr. Spike said.

Dr. Rebecca nodded. "Okay. Here is what we have."

A picture of the Magdalena formation from several weeks ago

appeared on the screen. "Here is how the Magdalena formation has looked throughout recorded history."

Dr. Rebecca uncovered the second picture. "Here is the way it looked a few hours ago, before my students left the university."

A few people gasped.

The picture was a grainy composite satellite and GPS reading. The formation had changed from almost horizontal, to a vertical plane. It had developed a bulb at the bottom, with a plug at the top.

Alex hid a gasp. It was rare to witness a sudden change in a volcano. If one volcano along the line was showing changes, what about less, or unmonitored ones?

Mr. Spike showed no sign of emotion. "This doesn't affect us. We don't have any current active mines in this particular area. While the deformation is visible, we will not mine that area until it stabilizes."

If Mr. Spike knew what this meant to himself, the local community, and the world, he wouldn't be so arrogant. Alex wanted to prepare a response to interrupt Dr. Rebecca and explain it to him.

Dr. Rebecca closed her eyes and adjusted the pictures again. "Magdalena is only one advanced deformation. Based on evidence I will show you in a few minutes, Mr. Spike we need you to help us set up more COSPECS. At least one placed in every mine within the radius of the activity."

Mr. Spike sat back in his chair and crossed his arms.

She held up her hand. "I know it sounds like a lot. We need to measure air quality and safety, as well as monitor outside the mines for GPS location changes as the ground shifts."

Mr. Spike glared at Dr. Rebecca.

The rest of the room listened closely.

Dr. Rebecca switched the screen. "The ground has shifted all over this part of the state. The rift valley has opened at least two inches at this northern spot."

She stopped to point to it. "And three inches eastward at the southern end. We have multiple events going on here."

Dr. Rebecca faced the room of people. "Earthquakes may be causing the volcanoes to prepare to erupt. The growing volcanoes may be causing the earthquakes. Or, they may be feeding off each other. Only time will tell. However, we must keep our communities safe, and be prepared for a dangerous quake, or eruption. There is potential for a devastating series, or combination, of both quakes and eruptions all along the Rio Grande."

Mr. Spike crossed arms, leaned forward. "Mining is one of the

major industries of this state. You don't expect us to stop mining because the ground shifts almost imperceptibly. Earthquakes happen nearly daily here. I don't see anything unusual about this bunch."

Dr. Rebecca placed her hands on the table and glared right at Mr. Spike. "The number is unusual. The magnitude is unusual. The swarms are unusual. The ground has moved more in the last week, than in the last thousand years. We must pay attention to it, and prepare."

He leaned back, arms still crossed. "So, we need to be careful in that one area. Big deal. We can focus on our other mines for a while. The miners in the affected areas are complaining they want a vacation anyway."

Dr. Rebecca turned back to the screen. "The magnitude of this series of events is enormous. No longer are the majority of events located in and around the town of Socorro, as in the recent past."

The map now changed to show about one third of the state of New Mexico.

"They are located here." She pointed to a spot in the San Mateo Mountains, southwest of Socorro. Active mines dotted the range.

"There have been three here, and here." She pointed to places between the Twins Sisters Peaks and Schoolhouse Mountain peak, to the southwest.

She scrolled the map down. "There have even been two here, and here, in the East and West Portillo Mountains southwest of Las Cruces. Each of these areas is an ancient lava flow region. Fumaroles are developing, where none existed a month ago. We even saw one on our trip here, between sections of the interstate."

Mr. Spike shifted in his seat. "They should release the pressure."

Dr. Rebecca turned to face him. "That is one theory. However, we also know that they rarely develop unless there is a great deal of pressure. The one between the two closed sections of interstate could become a volcano, and rise to the sky, lifting the interstate and commuters along with it."

Dr. Rebecca flipped the screen again to Paricutin. "The process of mountain building is believed to be millennia long. However, a volcano can develop, and erupt in a short time, even from a human's viewpoint. The Paricutin volcano in 1943, grew thirty feet overnight, and another one hundred and twenty feet the next day. It erupted as the sun went down on its second day of existence."

Alex's parents had visited there and met the people it happened

to, even if it was decades afterwards. His heart fluttered. This whole event was too real, and too close to home.

"Dr. Rebecca," Mr. Spike sneered. "I appreciate your concern. What may, or may not happen doesn't matter. Why should we interrupt our lives when quake predictions are rarely accurate? This movement may take generations. We should drill faster, and release the pressure, if anything."

Alex shifted in his own chair, his heart beating faster as Dr. Rebecca spoke. Mr. Spike's arrogance would kill him, and his miners. Most likely the miners, Mr. Spike probably didn't go the mines. Paricutin may have erupted before he, or his parents, and maybe even Mr. Spike were born. It was relevant to the current state.

Other people shifted nervously in their chairs.

Dr. Rebecca changed the scene on the projector. An excavated ancient house, lava depth forever recorded on the walls.

"Do you remember Pompeii? They had less warning than we do now. If one of these volcanoes decides to climb for the sky, it may take hours, not years. The earth is unstable right now, more than in recorded history. It's not like in the "Ring of Fire." We don't have anything to compare it to."

She waited for the pictures to sink in.

"Do you see this line on these houses? This is where the volcanic ash filled up to in a matter of minutes. Those not in the harbor didn't stand a chance. New Mexico has been given warning."

General Nord entered the room. "The state infrastructure must keep going. Creating a panic by forcing people to leave jobs and homes with no income would be a disaster."

He walked up and stood behind Mr. Spike. "Yes, we have been listening to your presentation in the next room. While both you and Mr. Spike have valid points, there is no easy answer. Even a few hours' shutdown of the state would have serious financial and morale consequences."

"Yes sir," Dr. Rebecca said. "I am aware that there will be consequences. However, I do believe the people should be given the opportunity to decide for themselves. Their lives, and the future of the state, may depend on it."

General Nord rocked back on his heels. "We have a more immediate concern."

General Nord studied the map on the wall. "The president wants to come and meet with you. He is listening in as we speak. He

needs to ask questions, and see what we are seeing."

Pandemonium broke out as everyone talked.

"Not safe."

"No, too dangerous."

"He needs to stay where he is for his safety," one of the mining officials said.

So they believe us, they simply don't want to act on it. Alex clenched his fists. These mine leaders would risk the lives of others without understanding that those people's lives were important. Dr. Rebecca was right, they'd never hear, or understand, Amber's research.

Dr. Rebecca held her hand up, and the room became quiet. "If he is listening to this meeting, then I hope he has heard what all the experts say. As much as we need his advice, he has a job to do. We have no idea if the Valles Caldera supervolcano, the Magdalena Mountains, Jornada del Muerto, or this new fledgling volcano may erupt. Volcanoes may be developing in many more places as well. I do not see a safe place in the state for him to visit."

General Nord nodded and tapped on his phone.

His associates entered the room and took seats.

"Share the rest of your presentation," General Nord sat in front of the projector screen.

She nodded, and returned to her presentation.

Alex ignored her next words. He knew what was going on. Observing developing volcanoes was a once in a lifetime opportunity. One he may never have again.

He looked over at Amber and reached for her hand. He didn't want the volcano to grow if it would destroy him, or especially her. Until his mom died, volcanoes had been a friend, something he thought he knew well. The last year, they would be his future, his feelings to them little changed. Pompeii's picture struck deep inside. He shuddered.

"What is it?" Amber whispered.

Alex turned to her, and took both her hands. "I want you to go and stay safe."

She laughed aloud, interrupting Dr. Rebecca. "I'm not going anywhere. This is my chance too. These fault lines are going to be exciting to explore as they develop. And maybe together, we can answer some serious questions."

The entire room stared at Alex and Amber. "I think you need to be away from the action. If it isn't safe for the president, it isn't safe

for you," Alex said.

She took her hands away. "How do we know the events here won't cause more events elsewhere? Perhaps even in California, Yellowstone, or even on the entire planet. There may be no safe place. I'd rather be with my family, and doing what I enjoy as the continent shifts to a new location."

People clapped.

Alex's heart beat faster than he remembered it ever doing before. She had slipped it in for those who would hear and question. Not that he had intended the whole room to hear what he said to her.

"Amber," Dr. Rebecca said, "What you said is important to remember. That quake which slid the southern part of the fault three inches, caused waves and flooding in several areas along the Gulf of Mexico."

Dr. Rebecca switched the picture on the projector to an island, with lapping waves. "If these quakes continue, it is possible the consequences could be far reaching. For example, Tuvalu, an island nation, is almost entirely underwater now, continuing to suffer even more loss of land. If the natives of this nation want to stay in their ancestral land, they will have to build a floating island of houseboats anchored to their previous habitations."

Nervous laughter resounded. It all seemed so unreal. Crying wasn't an option for either the Tuvalu islanders, or the people here.

"We have to be prepared for continental flooding due to dam collapse, or clogged rivers, if more movement occurs. Some river bends could shift drastically. As water searches for new paths to follow, farms and coastal towns will be inundated."

Dr. Rebecca looked directly into the camera. "Mr. President. In my opinion, neither the east coast, nor the west coast is safe for the leader of the country in the event of further massive movement. The south coast is not safe either, as the Gulf of Mexico sloshes into a new position."

The picture on the screen changed. "With Yellowstone northwest of us, I would recommend, with the assistance of your military advisors, you find a safe place for you, and your family, in the event of a catastrophe. Predicting the next event location and timeframe is an unlikely task."

Alex took Amber's hand and squeezed it. He wanted her safe. He also wanted his dad safe. He glanced across at Tom.

Tom bit his lip and stared at the wall.

The meeting went on without Alex. Somehow the people had to know the truth. Livia wasn't too far from the truth, though her version twisted in a different direction without his and Amber's scientific knowledge.

Chapter 20

Kirtland AFB, New Mexico

Except for the students, the majority of the participants were old enough to be Alex's parents. If they argued with Dr. Rebecca, they sure wouldn't listen to a college student and an almost high school grad, not matter how much experience they had.

Mr. Spike, red faced yelled something Alex didn't quite catch at Dr. Rebecca.

Amber squeezed his hand.

"Okay," Dr. Rebecca said, "I think we all need about a fifteen-minute break to think. Then we will come back, and decide what to do."

Alex and Amber walked out of the room together.

Tom caught up with them.

Amber squeezed his hand, let go, and walked on down the hall.

"Alex you've only known Amber a few days. You seem to like her more than Shelly." Tom grinned.

Alex watched Amber walk. Her stride, though confidant, betrayed her fear and confusion. She glanced back one last time and feigned a smile. "Shelly, was Shelly. She liked me more than I liked her. Amber is different, more of a friend I want to be around all the time. Must be the mutual volcano and earthquake interests." He smiled at Tom. It could be that, and something else, he couldn't quite place.

"Sure thing." Tom laughed. He pulled out his phone and his voice deepened. "I think it's time for me to return home and convince my mom, and your dad, to go somewhere safe."

Alex sighed. "I know. I wish I knew the safest place in the country for them. They won't want to leave Hawaii, you know."

Tom nodded. "Anywhere has to be safer than Hawaii if a tidal wave hits. I've seen videos of islands washed clean away."

"Hawaii is big enough. It would survive."

"Not now it wouldn't," Tom said. "Generations ago, natives built their homes out of renewable resources. Those trees, grasses, and other materials wouldn't destroy the environment if knocked down in a hurricane or tsunami. Homes could quickly and easily be replaced by the community. If all those concrete buildings were knocked

down, the mess has nowhere to go. The metal and concrete would rip out far more vegetation, and kill more people than waves alone."

Alex groaned at the image of buildings floating across the island, next to grass huts.

"Tidal waves would cause those concrete blocks to rip out trees, infrastructure, and much of it would end up on the ocean floor. All of the debris from destroyed buildings will destroy more than hopes and dreams. They will demolish an already fragile ecosystem." Tom scrolled through the names on his phone.

Hawaii, and everywhere disasters struck, it was the same. Giant landfills had to take all the debris, as it couldn't be easily recycled into new things. Littering the ocean floor could kill coral reefs and creatures that depended on the ocean floor for survival.

At a large initial cost for marine life, concrete gardens and broken ships, had created artificial reefs, and homes for coral and fish. Artificial reefs changed the depth, current flow, and temperature of the water. Many now wondered if they were a greater damage to the environment than a hope of building homes for oceanic wildlife.

Shoulders hunched, Alex walked back to the conference room. Tom was right. Humans had made some devastating blunders. He hoped they could be fixed. Now, his mind focused on trying to figure out how to undo the damage. If only steel could be turned back into minerals, and plastics back to oil, and whatever else was in them.

Amber slipped her hand in his as they reached the door.

"Thanks Alex, for believing in me, and caring."

"Your mom and Brandon care about you too."

"Yes, mom and Brandon care about me. It isn't the same. I thought I would miss having Karen, my best friend at home. While I do miss her, I've enjoyed talking with you. You remind me of her in some ways, a good friend."

Alex smiled. At least she agreed with his feelings. "Tom is going home to Hawaii, to try to convince my dad, and his mom to leave."

She nodded. "Good idea. They may not want to come. The changes here are already affecting volcanic composition there, you said."

"I know. I don't expect them to leave. He has to try, for both of us."

Corbo stood at the door, waiting on them. "Livia and I decided to join you. Tom, I heard you talking. Sorry to listen in. You will be missed."

"I hope to be back soon. Or, maybe I'll stay in a safe place with

my mom and Alex's dad."

Alex walked into the room with Amber at his side.

Dr. Rebecca tapped the table. "Are we ready to reconvene?"

Alex hurried to his seat. Tom going home alone would leave him alone, with no one he had known since early childhood. At least he would have Amber to talk to.

Corbo and Livia weren't all that bad either. They hadn't said much since the visit at her family's deli. Maybe there was some way the team could convince the leaders to do something. What that something was, remained to be discovered.

Dr. Rebecca stood in front of the projected New Mexico map. "General Nord, do you have anything to say?"

General Nord walked to the front of the room, and studied the map. He used his finger to draw the horseshoe shapes of the fault lines, and the new volcanic activity. He turned to the group of people.

"The president is concerned for the safety of everyone in this room, this state, the country, and the world at large. He has heard Dr. Rebecca's pleas for his safety. What do you think will happen?"

Dr. Rebecca glanced at Amber and Alex. "It depends on the continuation, and magnitude of events. A strong enough quake, even here in the heartland, could move the continent enough to form tsunamis. Especially, if several large magnitude quakes occur at the same time, along with an eruption of a supervolcano, such as Valle's Caldera next door to Los Alamos." She steered the conversation to a serious matter. Maybe she had overheard him and Tom talking in the hallway.

The color drained out of General Nord's face. "Dr. Rebecca, how much warning of a tsunami would the president have after a catastrophic event do you think?"

Alex hoped Mr. Spike was listening.

Mr. Spike shifted in his chair, looked away, and smirked. "Yeah right."

Dr. Rebecca glanced at Mr. Spike, and closed her eyes. "Claire, you would have the best information on tsunami destruction and warning times."

Amber's mom walked to the screen. "Planet map, please."

Dr. Rebecca switched the picture.

Amber's mom took the pointer and stood beside the map. "Many factors go into determining warning time. First would be the president's location. Second, would be the location of the event

which caused the tsunami. Third, would be the ricochet reaction that sometimes occurs. Fourth, and most important, would be if the tsunami goes through any of the zones where there is equipment stationed to detect them."

She pointed to the west coast. "The majority of sensors are deployed in the Pacific. Depending on the circumstances, there might be less than fifteen minutes of warning time. Unless a major catastrophic slip on western fault occurs, we shouldn't have to worry about tsunamis there. However, even California, Washington State, and Alaska are reporting increased activity. I hope to contact our representatives there later today for an update."

Amber's mom pointed to the capitol. "On the east coast, there are fewer sensor zones, as fewer destructive tsunamis, occur in this area. They don't develop enough steam to be as damaging, and are generally only higher than average high tides here. The events we are seeing now could negate that protective effect. If the lower half of the country slides far enough northeast, tsunamis could occur, though most likely pointed across the ocean."

Alex nodded. Unless, of course, the tsunamis set off events across the globe.

She faced the crowd. "What we are seeing is unprecedented. If the events here set off a worldwide chain reaction, those volcanoes on the Mid Atlantic Ridge will be squeezed, and are difficult to monitor. Those in the Mediterranean, Alex will better be able to explain the reactions of the volcanoes." Amber's mom smiled at him.

Alex awkwardly stood up. His dad could better explain things. After all, his dad had been to some of these volcanoes.

He took the pointer from Amber's mom. Mouth dry, he turned to the crowd. "General Nord, the Atlantic Ridge volcanoes might be the most dangerous. In fact, they might be showing signs of change, even now. We do not know how the ocean plates adjusted to the three-inch location change of the Rio Grande Fault. Many are so deep their monitoring equipment isn't always picked up by satellite. While this would be the time to explore if we could, to find out what is changing; there would be no way for scientists to quickly, and safely, return if something went wrong."

Volcanoes might be changing everywhere. At this rate, submerged volcanoes could rise from the sea millennia before expected, perhaps, even Loihi. Alex's pointer, and voice, shook as he pointed to the lines of Mediterranean volcanoes. "If the Atlantic Ridge erupts violently, it could send tsunamis east and west,

disturbing the magma flow, and potentially causing Valles, and other volcanoes to erupt even more."

Alex turned to Dr. Rebecca. "Did your students bring any recent data from the Mid Atlantic Ridge?"

Dr. Rebecca in turn looked to the back of the room at her students.

One of her students shuffled some papers. "Sorry, we barely had time to organize local info. If we had known you didn't have power or cell service sooner, one of us could have worked on it."

"It's okay," Dr. Rebecca said. "What you brought is a start."

She walked up to the map and took the pointer. "General Nord, we may have to stay here if the power doesn’t come back on. We need constant access to worldwide information about these serious events. All stats from the last few weeks need to be condensed. We don't have months to go over them, we need them now."

He nodded. One of the uniformed women came up and whispered to him. A few words from him, and she left the room.

Alex sat back down. Relief flooded through him, glad that he was no longer in the spotlight.

"What do you recommend for the mining commission?" General Nord said.

Voices rambled nosily.

Mr. Spike argued that the miners and community were perfectly safe. A few extra quakes meant nothing in the long term.

Dr. Evan and Dr. Rebecca's concerns and fears about tectonic stability couldn't quell his arguments. A few others listening, did take notes.

It seemed a re-hash to Alex. It was time to do something. Anything. Not sit around and talk.

Tom pointed to his phone and motioned to the door. They both slipped out.

Alex tried to close the door.

Amber pushed it back open to let her through as well.

The door clicked closed.

"Alex, you call your dad. Ask him to book me a flight home. He will want to hear your voice. I’ll leave mom a message. She'll be in class."

Alex nodded and pulled his phone out.

Amber took her own phone out and walked down the hall. Her voice was low and melodic. She must have called her friend Karen. He wanted to listen to the conversation to be sure it wasn't an

unmentioned boyfriend. He had to return to the meeting soon, so he sighed and dialed his dad.

Alex's dad wanted him to come home. After all, there was major concern for his safety here. Alex wanted to be here. The knowledge he would gain from the developing volcanoes would make a valuable contribution to science.

Another reason he wanted to stay was Amber. She needed a friend right now. He couldn't abandon her to work alone if Tom left as well.

After the conversation with his dad, he walked over to her.

"Amber, you okay?" Alex asked.

She leaned sideways against the wall and nodded in answer. "Worried about Karen. She isn't telling me something. I miss our closeness. In twelve years, we've never gone this long without talking. Not even in the remote jungles of South America."

Alex walked up to her and gave her a hug. "It'll be okay. She will tell you soon. Maybe she will come out here to be with you?"

Amber shook her head and looked up at him. "No. She won't leave Jerry. I knew it would happen someday. This isn't the kind of life she wants."

A tear glistened in her eyes. Amber shook her head. "She has the knowledge. Karen won't travel, and defiantly not without Jerry. She wants to be 'normal.' I know it's her choice."

Alex kissed the top of her head.

She looked up in surprise.

He took her hand, and led her down the hall. He had to follow his heart, like Karen with Jerry.

Chapter 21

Kirtland AFB, New Mexico

Amber leaned against the wall. Karen should have been here, not home with Jerry. During the call, Jerry's voice echoed in the background; along with others talking excitedly. Brandon hadn't mentioned any calls from her in a day or two. Karen had never kept secrets from her before. Something was different, and there was no way to find out what from here.

Alex walked over and hugged her.

Her stomach tingled. Was this how Karen felt with Jerry? She looked up.

Alex gazed down at her. He gave her a quick kiss on the top of her head.

She wanted to pull away; and didn't want to, at the same time.

As he pulled away and took her hand, she thought he was going back into the meeting. After all, they needed to be there. When he kept walking, she started to pull back.

The conference room door clicked.

"It's okay," Alex said. "Tom and your mom will let us know what else we need to know. Let's sit outside and wait on them. I'm not sure where we are going tonight, anyway."

Alex held the door open.

She blushed, walked through, and sat down on the step.

Soldiers hurried up and down the road not even glancing their way.

"I'm used to being the strong one. Not bossy, so much as the one Karen looked up to. I won't change for anyone."

Alex let out a small laugh. "I don't want you to. For me, or anyone else. It's nice to open doors for someone once in a while. You can repay the favor someday."

"Only if I have my hands full, please."

"Okay, whatever you say." Alex smiled and gazed into her eyes. "Tell me about your research methods."

Amber laughed. That was easy. Since being a toddler, she had explored little known faults, and learned from her mom. Climbing, digging, and doing the dirty work so her mom could add to the

knowledge base. Occasionally, she and Karen found arrowheads, or pottery shards, and called the local archeology team in to join them.

Of course, if the local kids were exploring the area at the same time, they always made fun of her and Karen. Their taunts hurt, and had pulled Amber deeper within herself, less trusting of others. Karen had fought to reach out to the other kids their age.

Sometimes it had led them both into trouble. Like the time Karen accepted a dare to pound two boards into the ground next to a seismometer. The fury of Brandon and her mom when they found out the recorded activity was faked had never been forgotten.

"I'm surprised Brandon let Karen stay behind," Amber said.

"She's always been at your side?"

"Yeah. Now, she's trying to piece things together from California. Not sure how much she's trying with all the people in the background."

Amber and Alex talked until she lost track of time. Talking to him was almost as easy as talking to Karen. After all, they both enjoyed science. She and Alex didn't have any history together, so there were plenty of stories to tell.

Of course, if Karen wasn't going to join her in the future, she might as well make other friends in, or related to, her field of study. The more she learned about him, the more she liked him.

The door squeaked opened behind her. "Amber, Alex, are you okay?" Amber's mom walked out and sat beside them.

Amber nodded. "Sure. We're talking. We needed a break. And they won't listen to us anyway."

Amber's mom laughed. "If you two wander off alone again, I'll have to call Alex's dad and have a good talk with him."

Alex groaned.

"Tom came back in and said you two needed some air. I thought he was joking." She ruffled Amber's curls. "You're still worried."

Amber nodded. "Alex's presentation didn't help. I'm more scared now. How is the meeting going?"

"It's over. At least for us. General Nord is meeting with the mining heads for a few minutes, then his own staff. We are being sent to the cafeteria. They are finding other, perhaps less attractive, accommodations for us. Hope you brought everything you need. The trailers will stay in the park where we left them, no way to bring them here with bridges closed."

"I hope we aren't more crowded than last night," Amber said.

"It wasn't that bad, was it?" Her eyes twinkled.

She held out her hand. "Let's go eat. Tom leaves in an hour. Dr. Evan and Brandon leave soon thereafter with some of the mining officials, and Dr. Rebecca's students. After all, they have to set up the COSPECs in the mines and lava fields."

"Mom, you will miss him a lot, won't you?" Amber stared at her shoes.

"Yes dear. Brandon can never fill your father's shoes. However, he is important to me. As Dr. Evan is important to Dr. Rebecca."

Dinner for the group was at first chatty as everyone discussed their plans. By the end, everyone ate silently. In a few short days, they had become a close-knit group who relied on each other, and communicated well.

Corbo and Livia sat off to the side, watching each other.

Corbo likely wanted to be part of the group. Livia, she wasn't so sure of. Amber had been the nerdy odd ball in any group at school. Here, nerdy is normal; and worldly Livia, the outcast. There had to be a way to reach her. Amber watched her close and tried to think of something to say to her. Karen would know what to say. Maybe a phone call later to compare notes, and ask her would work, when no one was listening.

One group of soldiers stopped by the table for Tom. They would drive him to the airport on the way to their own assignment, whatever that was.

Dr. Evan and Brandon prepared to leave with the specialists and mining officials. Mr. Spike didn't say anything around Amber, so she had no idea what General Nord might have said in their later meeting.

Amber's mom and Brandon said their goodbyes.

This time, she watched closely. The tenderness of looks and touches as they parted brought a mist to Amber's eyes.

She wanted to say something to him, and had no idea what. Her throat choked up. Brandon wasn't her dad. He wasn't a replacement dad either. He had taught her almost as much as her mom. Brandon took the time to be sure she understood any new concept, while her mom thought she already knew how to do everything.

Alex reached out for her hand, and she turned to him. She was glad he wasn't leaving. He was the only friend she had here.

Brandon climbed into the crowded transport vehicle, and waved to them. Amber's mom turned away.

Amber stood beside Alex.

Livia and Corbo waited nearby, a wistful look in both their eyes.

Her mom smiled through her tears, and wiped her eyes. "It'll be okay."

Once the vehicle was gone, she put her arm around Amber's shoulder. "We'll all be together again. Someday."

Amber hugged her close. Somehow, she wasn't so sure.

Chapter 22

Kirtland AFB, New Mexico to a restaurant and then a ranch.

Amber and Alex turned back toward the cafeteria building. The uniformed woman waited to lead them to where the group, now one third smaller, would spend the night.

"Lots to do," Dr. Rebecca said.

Corbo and Livia stood beside the building. On the outside, looking in.

"Corbo, Livia, do you wish you could go home?" Amber asked.

"No," Livia said. "I won't leave Corbo, and he has to stay with Dr. Rebecca."

Corbo took Livia's hand and walked behind their guide, almost passing her.

"They've been too quiet. I hope they're okay." Dr. Rebecca tightened her grip on papers trying to flutter away. "Today has been a shock to them."

The trailer their guide led them to was similar to the one they had left behind. The guide opened the door. "There isn't much sleeping room. A couple of computers have been set up. More accommodations may be made available tomorrow, depending on your plans."

Dr. Rebecca nodded. "That's okay. We are down to six people now. We should be fine. Who knows what Mother Nature has in store for us tonight."

Corbo and Livia went in ahead of Amber and Alex. They walked down the short hallway and went into one of the little rooms.

"Give them a few minutes. They need some time alone. Time to turn on the computers, and search for what updates we can." Dr. Rebecca said.

Amber sighed. For some reason, she didn’t want to work. Before, fieldwork had been exciting, to study things from long ago, and think of how they had affected the present, and potentially the future. Now, she was in the middle of events as they happened, and it wasn't fun. It was scary.

She flipped through the screens. Low murmuring interrupted the

data in front of her. The numbers and streams blurred before her eyes. No one else paid any attention, so she slipped out of her seat to follow the sound.

In one small bedroom, Livia leaned up against Corbo, and spoke softly.

Amber walked into the room trying not to disturb them.

"You are almost a brother, since my mom loved your dad."

"Hush, Livia. I was never your brother, and that's not what you, or I, want. That's why we get along so well. Even our parents trusted each other." Corbo hugged her.

"My dad may hate you even more now."

Corbo's lips brushed the top of Livia's head. "If he does, it's his loss."

She looked up to him. "He will see you as his rival for mom." Tears flowed down her cheeks.

His arms squeezed her tight, and he kissed her lips. "Livia, it's okay. We will be fine. If that's what you want. He will see me as a rival for your attention, no one else's. If he does, he has bigger problems than we can fix." He kissed her as she snuggled closer to him.

Amber waited, barely breathing. A side of Corbo unseen before. And Livia showing her vulnerability was unexpected.

Livia pulled back.

"Corbo, do you want to find the woman who raised you, who isn't your mom?"

Corbo looked up at Amber in the doorway. "I'm not sure. We aren't one hundred percent sure of the truth. I guess we have to find them, to find out. No idea where to start though."

"Where are they usually at this time of year? Perhaps we can find them by saying we are looking for you." Amber asked.

Corbo laughed. "That would make them trust you. No. You might have a point though. If we want to find them. I might can find a way. They travel between three or four widow's farms. It seems they preferred to work for women, not men. Somewhere only one or two migrant families lived and worked. Odd, isn't it?"

Amber sat beside Livia. "Yeah, in some ways you would stand out more, while fewer people would know about you."

"I'll find some phone numbers for you." He looked around at the tiny room. "I wish I could stay with Livia all night."

Livia smiled up at him.

Amber coughed. "Well, that might not work too well. We'll see."

"She needs me."

"I know she does. We all need your expertise Corbo."

"What expertise do I have?"

Noisy vehicles rumbled by, shaking the trailer.

Amber shivered. It wasn't a quake, even if it felt like one. "Don't you know? You are good at communicating. You put people at ease. The Mexicans are comfortable around you, even if you speak little Spanish. You know how to travel quietly, and unseen. We will need that. We have to return to the fault lines and study them without alerting the people in the area."

Corbo shuffled his feet. "I don't want to. I don't think looking at the fault lines will help. We must stop this series of events."

"We have to see and read the fault lines to do so." Amber said.

"Why not the volcanoes?" Livia asked.

"Remember the fumarole we examined on the way here? We know what they are doing. There is not enough time to check both. We've seen a few no longer sleepy volcanoes already. Now, we need to check the faults. I have to know if they are doing what I think they are."

"In fact," Alex said behind her in the doorway. "I'm afraid if we don't leave now, we may never be able to. They could detain us. This may be our one chance to discover something important, and there isn't much time. Red tape could keep us from observing the faults, or volcanoes, until the damage is done."

Amber shivered. "Please don't say that. They need to know the truth."

Alex held his hand over his mouth. "General Nord wants the truth. I think he's afraid of it. They want the safety of the community. They don't want us, or anyone else, to scare the public. The people would panic, and where would we tell them to go anyway if what we saw was accurate? Come on, we'll tell your mom and Dr. Rebecca we are going out to town for dinner." He pointed to their backpacks.

Everyone grabbed their bags, and went into the front room. Amber's mom had told stories of exploring alone in places where women were not respected while in her first years of college. At least she wouldn't be totally alone.

Dr. Rebecca and her mom's faces were drawn and pasty.

"Amber be careful. You know what to look for," her mom said.

Dr. Rebecca looked up from her computer screen. "I have your notes. We'll try to reproduce what you saw, and share the reports tomorrow."

Amber gulped and nodded. Leaving her mom behind on the base wasn't what she wanted to do. "Mom. We're a team."

Amber's mom nodded, and sat a pile of papers down. "And always will be. You need me here to compile your findings like back when you and Karen explored Haywood fault, and Brandon and I stayed at camp."

"We had a few archeologists with us then."

Amber's mom smiled. "Are you saying you can't do it? I think you can. I'd slow you down anyway. Go on."

She gave Amber a gentle push. "I'm not young enough for hiking in a hurry. There isn't much time. You can do it."

Amber hugged her mom close and gulped. To travel and work had been a dream, for the future, far future. "I'll miss you."

Her mom whispered in her ear. "Stay safe. Call when you can." She held up her phone. "I'll be right here. Remember part of our team is in the mines. Brandon's phobia of the dark could have kept him here with me."

Nyctophobia. If Brandon could overcome his fear, she could overcome being truly on her own for the first time. Karen would be proud she remembered the name of the phobia. Amber gulped and followed Alex, Corbo, and Livia out of the trailer without looking back. Pulling her backpack taunt, she trotted down the street.

Alex grabbed her arm. Whispering in her ear he said, "We are young lovers out on a stroll, don't make them suspicious."

She giggled and hid her mouth. It wasn't funny. She had stepped into a future that she wasn't sure she was ready for. Nervous laughter eased her tension enough to focus on the here and now.

Most of the vehicles were long gone, and the base streets deserted. A dog slunk past them, and howled. They strolled along, and chatted about the scenery. Several minutes later, they reached the guarded gate.

The guard glanced at them, and back at his notes as they walked right through. "Be back before dark!"

They nodded and walked down the road.

Out of sight, Corbo pulled them off to the side of the road behind a bush. "Here we hide until dark. Where are we going?"

Amber stiffened. Too much change in one day. Quake trauma and leaving everyone she knew behind. Unseen dangers lay ahead, no matter which path she took. Where could they begin?

Alex pulled her close. "It's okay."

"Brandon and my mom. Leaving them both in one day. Will I ever

see them again?" She looked up into his eyes and clutched her backpack. "I've always had them nearby. I hope mom and Dr. Rebecca will be safe."

The earthquakes were becoming too strong and dangerous. She was used to being tough, and didn't want to crack under the pressure and fear for her mom, and the life she had known. She didn't want to cry in front of Alex, unsure if he would view crying as a weakness.

Alex pulled her close. "I hope so. It should all be over soon. I almost wish we could keep moving now. Corbo is right. Night provides some cover of darkness."

Amber leaned against his shoulder. Life changed too fast. She wasn't used to it. There was no time to anticipate, and plan for what would happen next. She had intended to live at home for many years more, until after college and joining her mom and Brandon in research. Now, that future was crumbling away.

Corbo and Livia sat as close together as she and Alex were. She pulled out her map. "We have to return to the place on the river where Dr. Evan had to stop. We need to take the time to evaluate the rift."

"That's about ten miles, maybe more," Corbo said. "Are you up to the walk? It's not like we can ask for a ride. No one knows we are here."

"And there is nothing here for us to drive." Alex said. "We have to keep you safe." He pulled Amber closer to him.

Livia sat up. "Let's walk to a restaurant I know, and have some of my friends meet us there."

Alex groaned.

"They aren't all bad," Livia said.

"Um," Corbo said. "If you say so."

Amber checked in her pockets. She had some change and a crumpled five-dollar bill. It wasn't much. Not enough to feed even her for more than one meal.

"Don't worry," Livia said. "We don't have to eat, and I have a credit card if we need it later."

"So do I. Now let's go. I can hear dogs barking," said Alex.

The evening deepened to dusk.

Livia pointed which way to go.

Corbo directed them through holes in the underbrush they would never have seen.

Barking dogs and shouting men crept closer.

They reached the road, crossed it, and entered a small restaurant. No customers were visible.

Livia whispered to the woman at the counter.

The woman rubbed the table with her cloth and whispered back.

Livia led the way through a door by the restrooms. She put her finger to her mouth. "A buzzer will sound if the front door opens. Maria won't say a word. Come on."

Livia dashed through the kitchen cook area to a pile of boxes. Reaching behind the boxes, which claimed to be eighty-pound boxes of dishes, she pushed until the boxes swung away from the wall on a platform. She flipped a light switch and hurried down a small flight of stairs. A tiny bulb let out a candle's worth of light.

Amber and Alex followed.

Corbo closed the door. The stairs creaked under his weight.

At the bottom, there was enough room for six people to crouch in hiding. Four people could sit almost comfortably.

Livia breathed deeply. "If no one comes, we will leave soon. Amber, what will we need to look for?"

Amber tried to describe how folds in the rock signified where quakes had occurred in the past. She closed her eyes, and tried to concentrate on how to explain it. It was something she had always known. Trying to teach someone who didn't know was a challenge.

She opened her eyes to the grained wood paneled walls. The wood grain would explain the basics to Livia. Hopefully it would give her and Livia something to talk about, and maybe encourage Livia to help Dr. Rebecca in the future.

Alex might not even know as much as he needed to know, since his studies had been mostly volcanoes.

Amber traced the wood grain with her fingers, and tried to explain how different types of swirls meant different aspects of a geological past.

"Not sure I'm understanding it," Livia said. "Maybe I'll recognize it better in the rocks."

"Makes more sense that way, than when Dr. Rebecca tried to explain it to me." Corbo turned to Livia. "How do you know of this place?"

Livia let out a tiny tinkle of a laugh. "My friends and I use it to hide people moving in and out of the country. There are many of these places. Never thought I'd be in one. Oh well. Now we wait."

"Will General Nord look for us?" Amber said.

"They will forget us for now, as long as we don't stir up the

communities." Alex said with a look at Livia. "After all, he has to keep the population from panicking, and fix the broken bridges. Dr. Rebecca and your mom won't say anything. We sure played the part of couples well enough."

"Aren't we?" Corbo asked.

"Of course," Livia said. "I'm not sure about Alex and Amber though," she laughed.

Amber gripped her backpack strap. "We've barely met. I, um, never had a boyfriend before. That was Karen." The heat rose in throat, as the memories of late nights spent with Karen and Jerry flooded back. Many of those nights, when her mom and Brandon worked late, Amber and Karen weren't always alone at home.

Alex pulled her close, and she turned her head to his chest.

Footsteps resonated overhead. Something shuffled, and the door opened. "Livia, it's Nathan and Josie. Come on."

"It's good." Livia pushed past them.

They followed Livia's friends out a back door blocked by a dumpster to a waiting car.

Alex looked in the rear door, sat down, and pulled Amber in, almost in his lap.

Corbo squeezed in next with Livia right beside them.

Josie opened the driver's door. "Where do you all want to go?"

When Amber told her, Josie said. "No way. The military are guarding the bridges since so many aren't safe. Why do you want to go there?"

"We have to study the fault lines," Amber said.

Josie slid to a stop at a red light. "Why do you want to do that?"

Amber remembered what Corbo had said about Livia's friends. Breath deep. What would Karen say? Something silly that wouldn't work, likely. "Military leaders won't listen to us, unless we have documented facts. We have to find them, so they will listen."

Alex hugged her close.

Josie kicked the gas as the light turned green. "You need horses and mules. You need food. Until this mess is over, you need safety. Can you shoot?"

"I can aim," Alex said. "Corbo and I both have a handgun."

Josie whistled as she pulled out on the road. "Hope the military doesn't find out you sneaked that on base. Okay, I have a plan."

Crowded into the back seat, Amber tried not to squirm.

"I know a ranch near the Hubbell Spring Fault line. You can find supplies, and no one asks any questions. Livia, you remember it,

don't you?" Nathan said.

"Yes, I do. Should be the perfect place. Maybe Amber and Alex can even see quake damage there, if they know where to look."

The car hummed along in the dark.

"Do you think we will be able to contact mom, or Dr. Rebecca to share, and update information?"

Alex's hand slide into her own. "No reason to yet. I'll have to keep in contact with dad, when we have a signal. Not much time for fun chat."

Josie swerved around a curve. "Here we are. I have to turn off the lights now."

She turned off the lights, and steered the car onto a tiny dirt road, little more than a path. After several twists and turns through brush and brambles, they reached an open area. A crowded corral of at least forty horses and donkeys awaited them. Several men leaned against the rails.

Nathan walked to one of them. He talked to the man for a long time, and waved to the group in the car to come out.

The creepy men smiled too big, and lounged across the fence. They leered at Amber.

Alex pulled her close to his chest.

The man at the fence pointed to the corral. "Which one do you want?"

The horses didn't look healthy. They stood legs spread, breathing hard, tired, weak, and hungry. There wasn't any grass in the corral, or within reach either. She pointed to a brown horse that stood nearby. It seemed to be looking at her.

"Fine," the man said.

Someone behind him jumped into the ring and grabbed it. The horse snorted. The man led the kicking horse to a gate.

Amber walked forward to the horse being brought to her. She reached out her hand for him, or her, to smell.

"There is the step. Blankets with no saddles." The man held the bridle as the horse snorted and tried to pull away from him.

Amber stepped up onto the stump. "Does this horse have a name?"

The man laughed, and the horse neighed. "Why? They only stay here a day or two. We don't have time to waste on names. This little girl will take you to safety, that's what matters."

Amber sighed as she stretched her leg across the animal's back. She patted her neck. "Don't worry," she whispered. "I'll find your

name."

Alex, Corbo, and Livia now on their horses, were ready to go.

"Come on," Livia said, "Let's go this way."

Chapter 23

Ranch and trip to Hubbell Spring Fault

Alex gripped the reins and followed Amber. Not many horses were on Hawaii, so riding wasn't something he had done often.

Livia led them through the bushes down a narrow trail behind the corrals. The men's voices faded out behind them.

Small white stones glittered along the trail in the starlight. Alex's horse tailed Amber's as if used to close riding on dark trails.

Livia stopped and listened. She glanced back at Alex and beyond through the darkness of the trail.

Corbo rode up beside her on the narrow trail. He leaned over and whispered something Alex couldn't hear.

Livia rode a few more horse lengths and turned right into the brush.

Amber followed behind Corbo.

Alex almost didn't see where the trail broke off. Thick brush obscured the narrow opening, and brushy limbs bounced closed behind him.

They jogged down a dusty winding trail.

Livia slowed, and turned right through another brush pile. She stopped the horses in the middle of a small clearing.

Livia was out of breath when Amber and Alex reached her. "Sorry, to have to take you there. We are young women, not a good place for us to go for help."

"Are we being followed?" Corbo asked.

"No. They have to stay at the corral if any other people come for horses. Once we turned off the first time, they wouldn't bother. Now though, they won't quite believe Nathan's story. Which may be a good thing."

"Where are we?" Amber asked. "It's too dark to see much more than the trail markers."

"And everyone is exhausted," Alex said.

"I know," Livia said. "Ahead is a hunting lodge. It's safe for us to lock the doors and sleep there. The horses will have to go inside with us. Nowhere to leave them outside."

Alex slid off the horse, and led him by the reins.

Livia led her horse around a dumpster to the door of a small cabin.

Corbo took her horse's reins.

Livia reached under a stone for a key to unlock and open the door.

Two dingy lights flicked on, swinging on a rope from the ceiling. A concrete floor greeted them. Four cot beds nestled along one wall. Along the opposite wall, were rings in the wall, and wisps of straw. Along the back wall, a dry sink and cabinet were the only other furniture.

"It's not much," Livia said. "It's used by explorers or hunters. There are rings over here to tie the horses too, and straw out back. We will need plenty for the horses, and the beds. Blankets are stored under the cots. There may not be enough if it's cold. We will need to be up, and gone by daylight."

"How will we clean up after the horses?" Alex asked.

"Josie will come. If we hadn't needed horses, she could have brought us here directly through a back road."

Alex helped Corbo bring in plenty of straw and pile it near the cots. He carried the hay for the hungry horses, while Corbo brought in buckets of water.

Amber and Livia piled straw on the mattresses.

"I hope there aren't any bugs in the straw." Alex said.

Amber shivered and held up a tattered piece of cloth. "The best blanket. Someone had goats in here." The chewed up straw covered cloth stunk.

"Stay beside me, if you want to. I'll try to keep you warm."

A hint of a smile teased her lips and eyes. "Okay," she whispered. "Hands off, though."

He wasn't sure what to think. Amber reminded him of someone, and he didn't know who. She needed to stay warm, and Livia had Corbo. He stretched out to try to sleep, at least a few hours.

She sat down beside him, not touching, and pulled two tattered blankets over them.

Alex drifted off to sleep; glad Amber was happy. He had known her five days, and didn't want anything bad to happen to her. As a potential girlfriend, he wasn't sure. He'd wait and decide later.

Tomorrow would be a long day. Somehow, they had to find the reliable data for his dad, Amber's mom, and Dr. Rebecca to put together and convince the military to do something. What that something was, he didn't yet know. What they found in the ground,

would determine their recommendations.

Tom wouldn't be here to help him. He was probably half way home now, and had no idea where Alex was. A call to Tom in the morning might be a good idea.

He rolled over carefully, so as to not uncover Amber. Pitiful stinky blanket. If only he had brought one from the trailer. They should have known they wouldn't be going back.

Alex's body thudded onto the cold concrete floor. The building shook violently. He struggled to fully waken, and rolled over in case Amber tumbled out on top of him. The clumsy cots would offer no protection if the walls fell.

The horses neighed, and pulled on their rings, trying to break free.

"I'll find a candle when it stops shaking," Livia said.

Alex pulled out his phone and opened it. Not much light. Enough to see Amber's pale face. She held onto the cot, and waited the tremors out.

Many times every day they had been here, small tremors had been felt. Most had been so slight; they barely noticed them. This one was far worse. It lasted longer than the others. Something crashed outside.

The floor stilled.

His head and body continued to sway to the waves of the earthquake.

The horses pawed and snorted.

Livia managed to light a candle. "Okay. Now we check the time, and damage."

"It's about 5:30." Alex sat up. His head swayed to the beat of the retreating quake.

"Time to be up anyway," Livia said. "No visible damage in here. Not sure about the structure though. Let me look outside. Amber, call your mom."

Amber pulled the blankets up around her and opened her phone.

"Hey mom."

Alex pulled himself back up onto the cot.

Amber smiled as she listened to her mom.

Livia returned. "The dumpster is turned over, and a few bits of brushy trees have fallen. Otherwise, not much damage visible in this light. Better go outside around back, for privacy. Be back in and ready to go soon."

Amber finished the call to her mom and went to reassure the

horses. "Mom was glad to hear from me. She said it's bad there. We should call her back later when she has information."

She brushed each horse's face until they stilled. "Their computers crashed as the quake started, though they were coming back up as we spoke. She's proud I'm willing, and able to search the faults for anomalies. I know what to look for, she says."

"Come on Amber." Alex held his hand out to her. "We'll go outside first, then Livia and Corbo can go."

"I'm a big girl. I can go by myself."

"We have two candles." Livia handed Alex one. "Do you think you can go, and fight off a scared animal at the same time? Alex won't look if you don't want him to, I'm sure."

Alex flushed. "Come on Amber. I care about you, not that!" Her face had turned pale in the candlelight. Something bothered her.

"Livia," Amber said. "Those men, at that place, they won't find us, will they?"

Livia didn't respond at first. "I hope not. Take one of the horses out with you. One of you, keep a hand on the bridle at all times. They will let you know if there is any danger."

Alex nodded and took the bridle of the horse Amber had ridden last night. She seemed gentle enough, though she had pulled away from those men at the clearing. "The horses need a break too before we go."

Amber followed close behind. They went around the building, letting Amber take care of business first.

Alex made sure he watched the tangled brush for any sign of trouble. The horse was calm, munching grass as she relived herself as well.

Amber brushed against him as she reached for the horse's bridle. "Thanks," she whispered.

When he was finished, they walked back inside to retrieve Alex's horse, and their backpacks.

Livia stuffed food from a corner into a bag. "The underground pantry is stocked with food. Grab as much as you can carry." She and Corbo took her horse and went out of the building.

"Okay," Amber said.

Amber took out her "Ring of Fire" pillowcase. She set her jaw, folded it, and added a few cans on top.

"What did you name the horse?" Alex asked.

Amber looked up. "I haven't found her name. She has plenty of spirit when riled, and is calm with me, and you. So you must not be

dangerous." She tried to laugh a little. The chuckle died.

He smiled. Nice to know the horse likes me. "Will she answer to a name?"

"You can try." Livia walked back in. "Are your packs full?"

"Almost." Both said as they tried to close the loaded backpacks of equipment and food.

"Let me look for another bag. We are going to try to load them on the horses instead of us," Livia said.

"Not sure that's a good idea," Alex said. "What if they spook and take off with our food and equipment?"

"Keep some in your bag, and some on the horse. Josie will be here later today to clean and refill for the next visitors, if she can."

Livia searched a corner of the floor pantry. She found two more bags, and they stuffed them with a few more cans. "Grab the ratty blankets too. Don't leave anything. Who knows when we will have a roof over our head again."

Alex grabbed the blankets and handed them to her.

Livia stuffed them in, closed the bags, and handed one to Alex. "One bag for each pair. I wish there had been an extra donkey last night. That would have looked suspicious. Now candles out."

Livia blew out her candle.

The sky lightened a little through the open door.

Horses pawed and pulled on their reins, eager to look for water.

"Where are we going now?" Livia glanced at Amber.

Amber's hand rested on her horse's bridle. "Not sure. That fault you spoke of should be around close. Corbo, you know the area, don't you?"

She waited. "Corbo?"

"Sorry. Forgot a nod doesn't make a sound. I can try to find the way to the Hubbell Springs fault, if you show me the map again."

"It's not light enough," Alex said.

Corbo walked his horse out the door. "It might be near a place I found once, when I first started out on my own. It's near here, and I thought it was odd. It was creek, a lot like the ones Dr. Rebecca likes to visit. Maybe you will know. Anyway, it's a good place to stop for breakfast, and by then there will be enough light to see your map." Corbo led his horse outside.

Amber followed him.

Alex led his horse close behind.

Livia came out last and closed the door. Or tried to. It hung at an odd angle and wouldn't quite close.

"I can try to close it," Alex said.

"Don't bother. Josie'll have to fix it, and see if the cabin can be salvaged, or wait for major repairs."

Alex listened for strange noises, any signs of unwanted company. The ground seemed unstable. Stones, leaves, and small creatures continued to shift locations, as tunnels opened and closed around the brushy forest creatures. No birds sang to welcome the day. An eerie silence settled over them.

Corbo led them back the way they had come across the clearing. A trail marked only by white stones led far away from where they had spent the night, and away from the corral they had picked up the horses. Corbo branched off on a wider trail.

Amber rode up beside Alex.

"Are you okay?"

She tried to nod while riding.

He laughed to relieve the tension.

Corbo glanced back at them. "Almost there. That line of brush is next to a creek." He pointed ahead and to the right. "It looks different from what I remember, so be careful."

Corbo picked up the pace.

Amber hadn't complained of being sore from riding. Two hours last night, an hour this morning, and many more to come later in the day. All his friend's sisters would have given up last night. Even Shelly complained of long research days.

They threaded their way through the brush, checking for stability, both overhead, and beneath their feet. In a few minutes, they reached the creek bed.

Only, it wasn't a creek at the moment.

The dry stones didn't trickle with water.

Rocks were damp, and leaves made a thick carpet on the ground. Where the water should run was clearly visible.

The brushy forest was silent. Water evaporated, leaving steaming pools which bubbled. Minnows and crawfish splashed as the mud thickened.

Alex stared. Something about this scene was more devastating than any lava flow he had seen in Hawaii. Even the ones which covered roads, and pushed open doors, creeping across floors. At least there, animals and people had warning. Here, the water creatures would die.

Chapter 24

Hubbell Spring Fault, New Mexico

Corbo jumped down, and held his horse. His hands shook. "That rock, the one shaped like a millstone, I sat there and drank from the creek."

He stepped on the moss-covered rocks in the former creek bed, avoiding the splashing pools of minnows. "The fault is below the creek. At least, I think it is. We need water."

Livia slid off her horse. "Corbo, there are thousands of nearly identical valley and hill combinations in this region. This may not be the same one. When and where did you find the one you are thinking of?"

Alex and Amber slid off their horses and walked up to Corbo.

He turned to them.

"It was two years ago, before I met you, or Dr. Rebecca. I was running and hiding, following the leads I had been given to find Dr. Rebecca. I was being followed by someone." Corbo twirled the twig in his hands.

"Scared, I ran and found a house, a lot like the one from last night. I stayed there overnight. In the morning, I kept traveling. I found this odd place, next to a creek. The rocks looked funny, and were lifted differently than I would expect to be normal. I didn't know much about geology then, so I forgot about them. I rested, found a few berries to eat, and wandered on until I found a road. Two men came along in a pickup truck, and offered me a ride to the city."

He looked around at the scrubby trees. "Come to think of it, that ride seemed longer than the one last night. I was scared though. The two men didn't speak to me as they drove me to Dr. Rebecca's address."

Livia slid down and walked to Corbo. "I am so sorry Corbo that you had to run. It isn't fair!"

He gave her a quick hug. "It's okay. We will fix it in time."

"If we are lost, I'll dig out my GPS unit." Alex walked to a stone to sit down and look through his pack.

"What did you say to the men who found you?" Amber nudged a minnow into a deeper pool.

Corbo sat up. "I didn't say anything. I was thirsty; and they didn't have much water to share. I handed them the note with Dr. Rebecca's address. Their English was as good as mine. So I felt almost comfortable with them. There was something different about them. They talked as if I wasn't there."

Livia pulled away and stared at him. "You mean they looked Mexican, though they didn't speak Spanish?"

"Yes, perhaps. No, they didn't look Mexican. Not average European American either." His brows creased.

"Corbo, you could have been on the Tribal Lands south of Kirtland AFB. We probably are right now. I know the house is near them. Don't worry, as stressed as you were, it must have been an easy mistake to make. They probably thought you didn't speak English!"

The bushes rustled as they all laughed. A cat stuck its head out, stared at them, and stalked off.

Alex smiled. Maybe Mother Nature would heal now. He could only hope. There had been so much damage; surely, everyone had suffered enough. If only Corbo had said something, they might have realized who he was.

Deep in his backpack, under the canned food, the GPS unit hid under a notebook. He pulled it out. The glass glistened in the sun's rays as they peeked through the brush.

Amber's phone buzzed, and she answered it. "Sure Mom. Tell Dr. Rebecca we're fine. Lost though. Alex is checking the GPS. I'll ask. Alex?"

Alex read off their coordinates to Amber.

She repeated them to her mom.

"Sure. We will be careful. What did you say? We are? Okay." Amber closed the phone and turned to Alex.

"We are south of Kirtland AFB, and are on the unpopulated part of the Isleta Indian Reservation."

Corbo groaned.

Amber hid her phone in her backpack. "The good news, part of the fault we are looking for is nearby. Last night's quake was a 7.4 and located near the Magdalena Peak. It did a lot of damage. Bridges are down, more than before. Power is out in many places. The military will be frantic today."

Amber's shoulders slumped. "Our world as we know it is falling apart."

Alex pulled her close. "It'll be okay. You'll see. We will stay

together. I promise."

Amber nodded. "Every generation thinks it's the end of the world. In a way, it is the end of the world, as they have known it. We keep living and going on. I want to be an adult and on my own. Even so, I want to be able to call my mom when I need her."

Alex took her hands in his. "We are researching the faults and evaluating the situation. She has the best chance to convince General Nord, not us."

"Should we though? Or should we try to go somewhere safer, as we told the president to do?"

Alex looked out across the land, scrubby as it was. It was changing deep down, even as they stood there. "You've already answered that. The geology can't be trusted right now. We can trust each other." He pulled Amber close to him.

The ground shook. Twigs bounced and dried leaves rattled.

One of many aftershocks. Dozens of small ones could have occurred while they rode. The horses lifted their heads from munching on the scrubby grass. One snorted, lifted his hind foot, and pawed at the ground.

These may not be aftershocks. They may be foreshocks for a stronger quake to come. He shivered. Who knows which to call it sometimes. It may be both a fore and after shock. If enough pressure is relieved, no more will come. If not, it may be adding to the pressure as the plates dip and slide. Of course, fore and aftershocks can occur months, or years, apart from the main event itself.

"Let's go on over the hill," Livia said. "Maybe the creek shifted."

"I'll walk and lead the horses." Amber walked up to her horse and whispered something in her ear. The horse picked up its head, snorted, and trotted off, with Amber scrambling to keep up.

Alex laughed softly, as he grabbed his horse's lead and followed her.

Over the hill, Amber waited.

Sure enough, the horse had found some water, a narrow stream. Enough to allow them to refill water bottles, and let the horses drink.

Amber sat on the ground laughing. "Never tell your horse to find water, if you want to keep up with them."

Corbo and Livia sat beside the stream and chatted.

"Hey, we can save the minnows," Corbo said.

He grabbed an empty can, and carried a few cargos of shimmering fish.

Amber laughed when he poured them in the stream, and they swam off as far away from Corbo, and the can, as they could.

Alex and Amber searched for any sign of a fault line nearby. The light brushy woods appeared normal. Twigs and leaves covered the damp ground.

Amber's horse followed close behind them, as if not wanting her to escape from view. A pile of wet leaves scattered beyond the stream's end. She blew air out her nose and made the leaves dance.

Amber and Alex laughed.

Amber moved the leaves the horse had blown around. "This isn't good." She looked up at him.

He surveyed the area.

A round depression with recent density changes. The ground shifted under his feet. It looked odd. Almost a sinkhole.

The horse backed away.

Alex grabbed Amber and moved backwards as well. A piece of ground the size of a small car collapsed about ten feet downward right where they had been standing.

Dust billowed up. The three turned, and ran back to where they had left Corbo and Livia.

From a safe distance, they watched the dust cloud rise. It reminded Alex of the nuclear weapons testing grounds, not too far away, geologically speaking at least. A nuclear weapon explosion would be thousands of times larger, and more damaging.

Chapter 25

Isleta Reservation, New Mexico

Amber snuggled closer to Alex.

The dust cloud billowed. It cleared enough to step forward. Her scientific curiosity wanted to examine how much the ground had deformed, and determine if the sinkhole would become any larger. Her safety conscious self, wanted to turn and run. Doing so could land her in another sinkhole, or worse, if she wasn't careful. Rocks tumbled as the dust cleared, landing in a scattered pattern down the sides.

"Maybe this isn't the place to be. Let's go on. Which way?" She turned to Livia.

Livia turned red. "No idea. What does your map suggest?"

Amber glanced around at the scenery and pulled out her map. Brushy trees shook in the breeze from the sinkhole. Based on Alex's GPS, and her mom's words, they were near the Hubbell fault. Her mom had said it was a few miles away. A paper map this size was useless. A one square inch fifty-mile radius wouldn't direct them at all.

"I'll find us a few walking sticks." Alex led his horse over to the nearest brush pile to search. "Some of the wood is good. Some isn't."

The place they were at was the size of a pinpoint on the tiny brochure map. Even with an idea of where they should go, she couldn't picture it in a useful way. She needed a computer screen, and virtual map to scroll and enlarge. "Any ideas?"

Corbo walked over and looked at the map. "We don't want to go north; Kirtland AFB is there. East and west are too close to the base border. South we go."

Amber nodded. That would mean further into the reservation.

She pulled out her phone and tried to connect to an online map program. The screen was so tiny; she could only see bits at a time. At least it was better than no map. Eyes scrunched, she studied the map.

Alex handed each of them a walking stick. "Which way is south? My GPS only tells me where we are, it's not a compass too."

Corbo smiled. "Well, let's see. Our shadows point that way. It's early morning, so we know that way is west. So now, which way is south?"

Alex grinned. "Gotcha. I should know that. Let the horses lead the way, they will know if the ground is safe."

Amber climbed onto her horse's back. "I think your name should be Fortune. You're worth a fortune!"

After riding a few minutes, she turned to Livia. "I haven't been on many reservations."

"We took field trips as kids in school. You know how it is. What's close, you have no interest in knowing about. You want to visit what's far away." Livia said.

"Not me," Amber said. "Maybe I'm different. Plus, we moved and traveled a lot. Where would you like to go?"

Livia smiled as she pulled her horse alongside of Amber. "Well, I don't know. The old 'anywhere but here,' I guess. I'd about go anywhere where there is something to do."

Amber tried to follow the trail on her phone from memory. There wasn't anywhere nearby to charge it up, so she had to hope they went the right way.

"Tell me about your friends," Amber said.

Livia looked at her strange. "Can't believe you'd ask."

Amber slowed for a log in the path. "Sure I would."

"They are a group of people who started their own church. I guess there is at least one from each major denomination in it. They want to change things. Sometimes I don't understand what they are trying to do."

Amber picked her way through the dense brush. Back alongside Livia she said, "Do you spend much time at the deli?"

"Some. They want me to go out more."

Livia directed her horse through brush in the path. "Sometimes I think I miss important meetings, which is why I don't understand parts of what the group are doing."

"I hope they are okay with you being with us."

Livia laughed. "You heard Josie. They think I'll manage to find a way to force you to stop the quakes. After listening to Dr. Rebecca and all of you talk last night, I'm not so sure you, or any of us, can stop it."

Amber couldn't answer that. Of course there wasn't any stopping quakes and volcanoes. Unless they were caused by human activity, and only one activity had been known to cause measurable quakes.

Fracking was a dangerous process of forcing water deep into the ground, either to exact oil, or dispose of wastewater. Quakes caused by this were generally a magnitude 2.0 or lower. Could the military be fracking on the base? That wouldn't explain the 7.4, 6.9, 6.3, or 5.5 quakes. Unless they had fractured new faults, releasing pent up stress on the major faults nearby. It wasn't supposed to be able to happen. It could though, if there were numerous unknown faults under extreme pressure.

Water tables had shifted in recent years due to drought. Alone that would increase pressure on local faults. And potentially affect magmatic flow. Alex would know. Later, she'd ask.

Alex and Corbo rode in silence ahead, picking out a safe path for those behind them.

Amber was afraid to talk to Livia now. It brought out even more things that could go wrong. At least she knew a little about her now, and they could travel without worrying about her sabotaging their efforts. She was lost in thought when her horse stopped with a jerk.

Alex had stopped, turned around, and grinned. "Sorry, we couldn't hear your voices anymore, and had to stop and be sure you were okay."

Amber blushed and waved her hand. "Go on. We'll yell if there is trouble."

"Yes ma'am." Corbo tipped an imaginary hat as he turned forward and grinned.

Amber's cheeks warmed, and the tip of her nose turned red.

Alex laughed.

Soon, the land changed. Alex slowed down. "Time for a break I think. We need to stretch our legs, and eat."

Alex slid off his horse and walked back to catch Amber as she slid off Fortune.

His arms eased her aching muscles for a moment as he helped her down. Her bottom was sore from the unusual posture, almost as sore as her legs. In fact, trying to walk after riding a horse is a lot like trying to walk after riding in a boat for hours. Almost funny, and drunk. Giggling at that thought, she staggered behind Alex to the stump to sit down and eat a snack from her pack.

Alex's phone chimed. He checked the screen, and answered it. "Hi Dad. Sure. How much change? We can go there. It'll be a long ride. We have horses. Livia never did say for how long. Okay. Miss you too." He hung up the phone.

Alex shouldered his pack and reached for his horse. "We have to

cross the river. Magdalena Peak is showing massive deformation. We need to verify."

Corbo closed his pack. "Let's go south another half mile, then turn west. With good luck, we can reach the river about 2am and cross in the dark. The horses can swim, and we can ride, if we can hold on. Sorry we couldn't make it in daylight for you Amber."

"That's a lot of hours to ride," Amber said. "I'm sore."

"We all are," Corbo said. "We can take a few breaks."

"I'll be okay. Let's go." Amber shouldered her pack and whistled for Fortune, who came when she called. Painfully comfortable, riding Fortune seemed almost natural after the events of the last few days.

"It's about thirty-five miles to the river. Let's trot for ten minutes every hour, and that should help," Alex said.

"We've probably already rode ten miles with breaks today," Livia said. "I'm, sorry my friends took us farther away, instead of closer to the river."

A motor interrupted their formerly silent travel through the brush.

Amber rode up beside Alex as they entered a clearing.

In the distance, two four-wheelers traveled in their direction. There was nowhere, and no time to hide.

Amber rode forward for better view.

"Amber, come back," Alex yelled.

Amber ignored his call.

The two people on the four-wheelers hesitated, and stopped. One stepped off, and pulled her helmet off.

"Who are you?" The woman asked. "Do you have permission to be here?"

Amber glanced at both riders. "I'm Amber. My friends and I are lost. We are trying to return to the river."

The woman held the helmet in her hands and looked behind Amber. "You're a long way from the river."

Amber did not look backward. "Please help us. We know we shouldn't be here. It's a long story."

The woman grunted. "You probably don't deserve help. Call your friends forward."

Amber waved to her friends.

The other three horses trotted up beside her.

The woman said, "Hi. I am known as Windy, and my friend is known as Champ. Tell me what you are doing here. You are a long way from the river."

"Hi Windy. Sorry to intrude on your land. We are weary travelers

mixed up in an adventure we didn't plan," Amber said.

The woman almost smiled. "Aren't we all mixed up on trails we don't wish to be on. Go on."

"Alex and I are strangers to this region, here to study the earthquakes. Corbo was helping, and Livia tagged along. We left the rest of the scientists, when the group spilt up to research different areas."

Windy watched her for a long moment. "I don't think you are telling the whole truth. There's a creek over there. Let's go sit down." She jumped on her four-wheeler and took off.

Amber rode Fortune behind Windy.

A short trot over the rise, and they reached the creek, Fortune went straight for the water. Amber laughed. "You know what matters, don't you?"

She slid off, and walked over to where Windy and Champ sat on a rock.

"Amber, tell us more about why you are here." Windy said.

"Brandon and Dr. Evan joined the mining team. Tom went home to bring Alex's dad to a safe place, and Mom and Dr. Rebecca stayed on the base."

"And?"

Alex's hand rested on her shoulder. "We left the base."

"Why?"

"We need more specific information. We had planned to talk to the governor to encourage people to leave before the quakes become worse. There isn't much time," Alex said.

Windy nodded. "So you ran away on your own to find the answers faster than the bureaucracy would find them. Okay. This is no place to hide. Too open. And you shouldn't be here without permission."

Amber nodded. "Please help us reach Magdalena Peak. We need to make sure the volcano there isn't about to blow."

"You think Magdalena Peak is causing the quakes?" Windy asked.

"Some volcanic activity is occurring there," Alex said.

"Some of the quakes are occurring on ancient fault lines," Amber said.

"I think it's the military installations," Corbo said. "They need to fuse the fault lines."

"My friends say we are being punished. We have to change. Exactly what, and why, they don't say," Livia said.

Windy watched each of them as they spoke. She turned back to Amber. "I think each of you has told the truth as you know, or believe it. We were here to find quake damage ourselves. We live over that rise."

She pointed. "You don't have much time. Not sure if you can help others or not. Come on. Lead your horses. I'll take you in the horse trailer as far as I can. We can hide you behind hay bales if need be. It isn't safe for you to be here." Windy turned in the direction she had pointed.

"Are the Native Americans blaming us?" Amber asked.

She turned back to Amber. "Everyone is blaming someone else. No one is completely innocent. No one is completely at fault. Now, we have to have you out of here, and us back before dark. Curfews are being threatened."

Amber shivered as she grabbed Fortune's bridle and followed Windy. Everyone else followed behind them.

"I think blowing up the fault lines would make them more dangerous," Amber said.

Windy trudged on. "Popping a pimple lets pressure and pain out. Blasting a fault line open might let out some pressure. However, in time, that pressure will rebuild. The next slip, perhaps many generations from now, may be far more serious, with mudslides, collapses, and who knows what other devastation."

They topped the rise. A tiny ranch house appeared, with a corral similar to the one they were at the night before. She shivered at the memory.

"You okay?" Windy asked.

"Sure, it reminds me of the place our horses come from. Not a nice place."

Windy nodded. "I think I know the one. The trailer is behind the house. Champ will be back in a minute with the other four-wheeler. Go on around and lead the horses into the trailer."

Amber walked Fortune around the house and up to the trailer.

Fortune stopped, nickered, and pulled back.

"Don't worry girl. I am going with you." Amber stepped in, found a ring, and attached the bridle. She sat down on a hay bale nearby while Livia, Alex, and Corbo settled their horses.

Chapter 26

Isleta Reservation to Rio Grande River and on to Magdalena Peak, New Mexico

Amber sat on a hay bale and watched how well each of the others cared for their horses. Fortune chewed hay contentedly nearby.

Alex's horse backed and fussed, settling in when Fortune neighed. He patted the horse's rump.

Livia's horse calmly walked in and waited to be hooked to the ring in the side of the trailer. She rubbed her horse's back where she had been riding.

Corbo's sweaty horse clambered in, looked to the back, and settled by the door. He blew and snorted as Corbo hooked him to the trailer. Corbo found a rag to wipe the horse down.

Alex sat down beside Amber and pulled his pack between his legs.

Amber bent over to whisper in his ear. "Can they be trusted?"

Alex nodded. "We have to, for this. I'm not sure what they are doing here. Don't ask."

Amber hugged her backpack. Hopefully, Windy would take them where they needed to go.

The truck rumbled to a start. Windy pulled down the road, picking through deep ruts.

Even though Amber was sore from riding, it seemed the truck wasn't going much faster than the horses could.

Empty scrubland passed. Not a house in sight.

Windy slowed the vehicle and turned the engine off. The front door slammed.

Windy opened the back door.

"Hide behind the hay bales. Make it look full back there. We have reports that the roads are bad a few miles on. We may be stopped and searched."

Windy slammed the door shut and slid the lock in place. The truck door shut, and the engine started.

It only took moments to adjust the hay bales, making it look full.

"We'll go near the cultural center," Livia whispered as the group

huddled close. "It's beautiful and so relaxing. If only we could see it."

The truck slowed.

Fortune snorted.

"Stop!"

The truck stopped. The trailer jarred as the momentum pushed it forward into the truck bed.

Amber's head hit Alex in the shoulder. His tense arm muscles held her close.

The truck door opened. "The window on this old truck is broke. What is the matter?" Windy said.

"No traffic is supposed to be going out. We have to make sure you don't have any contraband." The voice said.

"Nope. None here. Moving a few horses. No alcohol, drugs, or anything."

"Sorry, orders have to be followed. The roads are a mess. Travel is virtually impossible. Can you imagine if everyone tried to load up and leave?"

"They'd clog the broken highways," Windy said. "I know."

"We have to be sure people aren't panicking from the recent events. And there is nowhere for them to go. People have to stay where they are for now."

Amber smiled at the fear in the man's voice. If a policeman was so afraid already, and it was only going to become worse, she could imagine what the population would do. Right now, they thought it would all be over soon, if not already.

"Go ahead and look," Windy said. "All we have are a few horses going to the relief efforts. Nothing important to you. We have a change of boots back there, and a blanket or two. Even a day's worth of food in case the tires blow."

"Okay. Where are you going anyway?"

"My instructions are, let me check." Windy said. Papers rustled. "A little place near Socorro. They are staging rescue teams near there. They wanted six horses, so we have to stop and pick up two more."

The lock slid and the door opened.

"We are late already with all the new road ruts," Windy said.

Fortune snorted and stamped her foot. The other three horses followed her lead.

"Um. Okay," the man said. "You are free to go. Drive slow and careful."

"I will," Windy said.

The back door slammed shut, and the horses settled down. Fortune pulled wisps out of the hay bundle.

The front door slammed and Windy drove off. She steered to avoid potholes, and other road hazards, causing them to slide into each other with every curve and turn. The truck rolled to a stop. Was this as far as they were going?

"Come on," Windy said. "Glad you played it safe back there. You all take the horses out and stretch their legs. The point you want to visit on the river is about two hundred meters south of here. Be back in one hour, or we go home."

Alex moved the top hay bales out of the way.

Amber clambered out from behind the hay bales. She took Fortune's bridle, while Livia and Corbo took their horses out first. As she passed Windy she said, "Thank you so much. How far are you willing to take us?"

Windy patted Fortune's neck. "As far as we can. Go now. Be back in an hour."

Amber walked off with Fortune by her side. She caught up with Alex, and they held hands. It wasn't far to the river's edge.

Rocks had tumbled down the bank into the river. Boulders needed far more force than a gentle quake to have been disturbed. Trees, shrubs, and a few animal carcasses littered the river's edge.

Amber turned to take in the whole scene.

"Don't look back." Alex grabbed her shoulders.

Her face drained of color. "What?"

"Around the bend we can study the river."

They passed a boulder and the trailer was now hidden from view behind them. "They had something on that trailer. I'm sure of it. There were a few packs in the other corner under the blankets. No idea what, or who."

Corbo nodded. "Could be Mexicans, pottery, stolen goods, or artifacts they have dug up. We don't know. They will take us to where we need to go. So be quick, and don't look until the hour is up."

"Um, should we have a look out?" Amber didn't want to think about trouble. She had been trained to be more aware of danger while in other countries. Not her own.

"I'll do it," Livia said. "I don't think it was Mexicans. I know most of the runners in the area. Something else. I'll be best at look out, and guard the horses."

Livia tied her horse to a bush. "Sorry Amber, I won't be able to

practice what you showed me. Tie the horses to this brush, and I'll stay here."

Amber handed Fortune's reins to Livia. She glanced back at the river. It would take a lifetime to fully comprehend the consequences of the last few days' worth of damage to the river. If Mother Nature wasn't done rolling over, it would change again, perhaps many times before it stilled enough to effectively be studied.

A hundred years ago, the Rio Grande flowed much stronger through this region. Several dams up river had reduced its flow well below normal. Ecosystems that had evolved to depend on the annual floods, silt deposits, and fish migrations suffered from the lack of annual flooding. It looked even narrower than she thought it should. They hadn't seen this stretch of river before. It was a few miles south of the interstate crossing.

"The river is dammed somewhere. If it breaks, water could gush onto the flood plains here," Amber said.

Alex pointed to the boulders on the other side they had already seen. "All it would take is a few of those up river to have an effect. I don't even see the normal water line. The water isn't flowing right either."

The water swirled more than it flowed. Animal carcasses brushed up against the shore, and back out, like a gentle tide rolling on and off the land. Logs floated by, slowly, catching eddies, and drifting further toward one shore, or the other.

The hour sped by as they explored the damage, and the old and new twists in the rock. It was evident there had been many quakes here in the distant past. A good predictor of what was to come.

Livia called them to come back as they explored one particularly twisted formation.

Amber could spend a whole month on that one twist, trying to unravel its stories. Even that might not be enough. She hurried back to grab Fortune's reins.

"Josie called again," Livia said. "Almost wish she would leave me alone. She wanted to know where we are."

"What did you say?" Amber asked.

Livia laughed as she handed Alex his lead rope. "I told her we are lost. I don't think she believed me."

Windy and Champ waited for them on the tail of the trailer, eating and talking.

"Good. You did decide to come back," Windy said. "Wasn't sure if you would try to go the rest of the way yourselves."

"It's a long ride," Alex said. "We appreciate your help. Though I'm not sure how we can repay you."

Windy smiled. "Don't worry. It is nice to see the countryside. We don't leave our home on the reservation often. It's normally all we need."

Once the horses were hooked in, Windy closed the back door.

Amber leaned back against Alex's chest in the hole they had made in the hay bales. "She seems happier. Not sure if we should be scared of her."

"Fortune would let you know if there was a problem. That horse has bonded with you. Maybe they made enough money to buy something they want."

"As long as they didn't sell us, or the horses."

The trailer swerved around a curve and picked up speed.

"I can see out a tiny bit," Livia said. "Amber, do you and Alex want this spot?"

"Sure, thanks."

It took a few minutes for everyone to change positions. The trailer wasn't moving as fast as she thought it was. The sides of the road crumbled, raised in places, lowered in others. Far off, fumaroles had developed. Sand blasts had covered the area in fine grains, turning flat ground into molehills.

After what seemed like hours of viewing devastated scenery, and few other vehicles, the trailer slowed down. They took the next route west. Mountain peaks rose in the distance. Above them, a thin trail of smoke floated on the gentle breeze.

Alex whistled. "I hope that's a camp fire somewhere."

"That wouldn't be safe," Corbo whispered. "Way too dry around here."

The truck stopped. Amber closed her eyes for a moment. It was almost dark now, and it had been a long day.

The trailer door opened.

"Okay everyone. Stay quiet. Go west a few miles. It's the tallest peak in the area, and growing taller," Windy said.

"Is the smoke coming from it?" Corbo asked.

Amber untied Fortune as she listened.

"Not sure. Hurry, we mustn't be seen. Good luck with whatever you are trying to do," Windy said.

"At this point we're simply gathering facts." Amber passed Windy. "Thank you so much for bringing us here."

"No problem. Gives me an excuse to go visit my brother." She

closed the door and hurried back to the truck.

Amber followed Alex off into the brush pile.

The truck roared to life, and with the crunch of gravel, was gone.

Even with Alex, Livia, and Corbo beside her, she felt more alone than ever before in her life. Abandoned without her mom or her best friend in a seismically unstable environment. Amber blinked. She could do it, if they could. Here math didn't matter. Survival mattered, not the order of numbers in the program.

Amber pulled out her phone. No update from Karen. She must still be checking worldwide updates.

Alex had his GPS unit in his hand. "We are in about the right place. If the GPS satellites haven't been knocked too far off course due to the recent events."

"How long does it take them to reset?" Amber asked.

"Depends. This one is good, not intended for rapid change though. I think we best follow the trail of smoke. Corbo, can you lead us?"

Corbo nodded and walked down the trail.

Amber patted Fortune's face. Soon, they would be trailing through the scrubby desert. It could be fun to pretend they were explorers, and no person had ever been here before. Of course, in a sense that was true. The mountain had grown, and was trying to become a volcano again.

No one had ever seen it as it was now.

Chapter 27

Magdalena Peak, New Mexico

"Let's go!" Alex said.

His horse neighed and tried to take the lead. He reined him in, and kept him prancing beside the road.

Corbo walked his horse up the trail, away from the road.

Amber, with a faraway look in her eye, climbed on Fortune and glanced back and forth down the road. She grabbed the reins and followed Livia past Alex.

Alex waited on Amber to ride up beside him. He figured it was better to ride beside her, or behind the group as a whole. He didn't fully trust Corbo, because of his wish to fuse the plates. Right now, they were all hoping for the same thing, answers.

Once those answers about Magdalena Peak showed themselves, Corbo's actions would have to be reevaluated. He and Amber may have to separate from them, and go on their own, in this truly alien landscape.

And then there was Windy. She could be anybody. Her helping them seemed out of character with the stories he knew of mainland Native Americans.

What if this was a trap? His dad had warned him of traps laid for scientists. Usually, they were in developing countries where the government, or the citizens, didn't want answers.

Alex checked his GPS. It said they were near the redeveloping volcano.

That hour had been enough time for Windy to make many calls. Someone could be watching them, waiting to ambush them while they rode or surveyed the canyon. Perhaps they should go somewhere else instead.

The rough terrain was littered with shrubs, boulders, and rocks of all sizes and shapes. Some of the thick, prickly, scrubby trees hid parts of the path they followed. It would be difficult for them to hide on horseback. People on foot could easily hide, if they had arrived first.

"Everyone, let's stop. I'll be back in a minute. Corbo, keep watch." Alex reached in his pack, and felt the outline of the gun.

Within easy reach.

Amber's face turned pale.

He turned his horse and trotted back to the road. They hadn't gone far. A few minutes, and the road stretched out before him.

The horse reached the trail opening. Alex reined him in behind some brush. The wavy road stretched out in both directions, with no sign of traffic. He tied the horse to a branch, and walked along the roadside. There was no sign of horse, or human tracks other than their own, for several hundred yards.

A thought nagged at the back of his mind. It must be worry about the volcano. If it erupted while they were there, they had no chance of escape. Better to camp soon, and safely, so they could ride there and back quickly in the morning. Where they would return to, he had no idea.

The horse nibbled branches calmly as he approached.

Something rustled off in the distance, beyond the edge of the roadway.

Alex jumped, reached for his gun, and turned.

A rabbit scurried across the road.

Something twinkled on the side of the road. It could have been nothing, a trick of sunlight on a piece of metal on the road, or volcanic gas seeping, preparing to create a new fumarole.

Alex's brow wrinkled. This landscape was changing too fast for him to keep up. If only his dad, or Tom, were here to help him decide what was important, and what didn't matter at the moment. Amber could help, with her knowledge. Depending on her, and short phone calls to his dad and Dr. Rebecca would be all the help they would have to analyze the dangers popping up in every direction. Until their batteries ran out, that is.

Magdalena Peak steamed ahead as evening closed in. Time to ride. If they found enough information, they could try to save the local communities. If not, they'd have to keep searching.

Alex placed the gun in his pack. He turned the horse from the road, and trotted back to the group.

Perhaps he should let them know his fears. His eyes closed. The memory of the empty road stretched before him, and his stomach clenched. Something unseen had startled the rabbit. Who, or what it was, would have to remain a mystery. No time to explore the road.

Corbo had a gun and could shoot, hopefully to kill or wound, if necessary.

Alex had a better chance with a walking stick, since his collection

tool had been left behind at the base. A shot would grab attention, good or bad. Best to keep the guns put away unless they needed to scare someone. Walking sticks might be their safest protection, as long as no one snuck up behind them.

Amber waited where he left her. Livia and Corbo a few horse lengths away, whispered to each other. His horse neighed and stopped beside Fortune.

"I couldn't see any signs of anyone following us. No tracks. One odd sound, it could have been anything. Amber, Livia, be sure and stay with Corbo, or me, at all times."

His horse pranced, ready to travel on.

"Corbo, you ride in front. Amber, go next behind him. Watch one side. Alex, then you can come," Livia said.

"No," Alex interrupted. "I have the second gun. I need to go last."

Livia rode back to stop in front of him. "I know the region better, and what to listen for. I'll yell if I see or hear anything."

"Okay, let's go then." Alex moved out of the way to let Amber go on. He shook his head at Livia as he passed her, and caught back up with Amber on the trail, barely wide enough in places for both horses.

Corbo's horse trotted down the winding trail.

"I wish we could go somewhere else," Amber said. "A live volcano is so different from fault lines."

"Where? We don't know if Windy alerted friends, or not. We don't know when a foe may turn friend, or a friend turn foe."

"With the world changing under and above us, will we ever find the stability our parents knew?" Amber steered Fortune behind Corbo on a narrow strip of trail.

By air, it was about five miles to the peak's summit. With brush, and land deformation, it could be double that distance. By horseback, it could take hours to reach the peak.

Corbo led them off to the right along a narrower path.

Magdalena Peak was a popular destination. This trail couldn't be the one visitors travelled on. There hadn't been a parking area, or observatory. Windy had let them out away from the main trail for some unknown reason.

Alex turned to face Livia as he rode. "Where's the main trail to the peak? This can't be it."

Livia's horse picked its way through the brambles. "It's probably been blocked by rangers, and may be guarded. Better to travel this oryx trail they aren't watching."

"A kind of burro?" Alex asked.

Livia laughed. "Not exactly. An African antelope the military brought in to keep brush down on the bases. Some escaped, and have created havoc in a few delicate landscapes. The environment is changing to accommodate them by increasing brush growth rates."

Shadows crept across the ground as they rode. Silence in the brush. No small mammals scurried about their dusk time search for food and shelter. Night was almost upon them.

"Amber, ask Corbo if we should camp soon. Not sure if we are safer nearer, or farther from the road."

Amber jogged up beside Corbo.

Corbo pointed and kept going. Any verbal response whisked away, and Alex couldn't hear it.

Amber slowed for Alex to catch up. "He says around that bend should be a good place."

There would be time to find wood and build a fire to keep wild animals at bay, if there were any left in this area.

The trail bent around a little thicket of bushes. Thorns and branches reached out to grab unsuspecting travelers. They shook their heads, and some of the twigs fell out, while others remained tangled in manes and tails.

Alex swung down from his horse.

"Amber?"

"Be there in a second." Amber walked back around the brush. "I was watching. It's okay. No animals though."

She brushed at her hair with her fingers. "It'll be dark soon. I hope there are no scorpions out here."

Fortune nibbled at the brush pile. "Sorry there's no water nearby. At least there was some on the trailer." Her hands brushed bits of dirt and twigs from Fortune's mane.

"Please don't wander off," Alex said.

"There's a ravine on the other side. Maybe we should check it out before dark," Amber said.

A ravine would be a good place to gather wood for a fire. They would leave early in the morning, and might not have time to thoroughly check it out then. Signs of ancient quake and volcanic activity might help them with their analysis. He'd have to remember what Amber had showed him earlier in the day, about quake lines. She shouldn't be in a ravine if another event occurred. It might be too dangerous.

"We'll set up camp. It won't take long." Livia pulled the extra bag of blankets off her horse.

"Okay. We won't go too far. Be right back."

Alex followed Amber around the brush pile. A typical ravine yawned in front of their feet. No stratified rocks visible, like the noticeable quake damage on the riverbank. Research here wouldn't be instant recognition.

Amber picked up a small stick. As she walked along, she pointed out resting rocks that hadn't moved, and rock layers that twisted, and jutted out, without soil or vegetation coverage. She dug in a few spots, to look closer at the deformations.

"What do you see?"

"If no seismic activity was going on here, I'd be excited to study these formations. It could take years." Amber turned from digging to look at him and point to an interesting multi colored swirl.

"See this spot? Here is where the rock has twisted on an upward journey, and fallen again, twisting even more. I bet it follows the pattern of the Magdalena volcanic eruptions. I don't have the equipment, or time, to date it correctly. However, I can guess it's from the last eruption."

"That was thirteen million years ago." Alex rubbed the lines on the rock.

"That eruption built the landscape then, and even now." She turned to the peak.

Rising steam faded into the shadows of nightfall.

He took her hand. "Come on, let's go back to camp. The peak has been rising at about two millimeters per year for centuries. The last few weeks, it has risen almost two feet. I'm almost scared to be here."

Beyond the ravine, camp waited, with Corbo, Livia, and food. "Are there many fault lines right here?"

Amber climbed around a brush pile. "Most definitely. I've never seen a detailed fault map of this location. Many are small faults that can be guessed at by the twists in those rocks. The stress and strain has built up over thirteen million years, or more."

"An earthquake could open a trap door causing a sudden upward surge of magma," Alex said.

Amber reached the brush at the edge of the ravine. "Magma movement could break smaller, tense faults wide open."

"Or it could cause an internal rock slide, damming the magma chamber, increasing the pressure." Alex groaned as he said it. "I'm

calling my dad in a few minutes. Let's eat first."

They walked around the brush pile that hid the campsite.

Livia and Corbo ate from cans beside an unlit woodpile.

"What did you see?" Livia held a spoon almost to her mouth.

Alex sat down and opened his pack. "Between the two of us, not good things."

He pulled out some canned beans and nuts. "How much food do we have left?"

"If we all have the same amount, maybe a day's worth. Not much we can gather around here."

"And almost out of protein," Corbo said.

"We may not have much time."

"Why?" Corbo asked.

"The stresses on the faults are right under our feet, and on up to the peak. It doesn't look good. If it is bulging, who knows which may go first. The volcano, or any one of numerous faults. And whichever goes first, will set the other one off."

Corbo finished his handful of nuts. "What do you want to do? Is it too late to escape?"

"We have had thirteen million years to go away. Now we are right in the center of an active geologic movement." Alex took a bite of beans.

The weight of his phone in his pocket urged him to call his dad. The last bite of food was halfway to his mouth.

A sudden sharp, loud sound ricocheted through the night.

The horses pulled on their leads and neighed, pounding the ground with their hoofs.

Alex dropped his fork and glanced around.

No sign of the gun, or the shooter.

"Down on the ground!" Corbo said.

"Where?" Alex lay on the ground.

"Not sure," Corbo said. "Wait and listen."

Amber crawled over to Alex and leaned against him.

Chapter 28

Magdalena Peak, New Mexico

As the sound of the gun ripped through the air, Amber slid onto her stomach. She crawled over to where Alex was.

The horses neighed and pawed the ground.

"We are out in the open, an easy target. Being in the bushes wouldn't help either," she said.

"Stay close," Alex said.

"What about the horses?"

"Hopefully they won't escape," Livia said. "We need them no matter where we go."

The horses pulled away from the brush and snorted.

Amber lifted her head.

Fortune stared right at her.

Amber moved forward.

The ground shifted.

She wavered, balancing against each wave as it rolled through the ground.

"Oh no. It feels like someone jumping on a waterbed!" Livia said.

The ground continued to roll as the horses pawed, and tried to stay upright.

A few of the bushy trees fell over near the horses, spooking them more.

Trees and rocks crashed in the ravine.

A large plume of smoke spiraled above the bushes from the mountain peak.

The ground moved, rolling and twisting under them.

Alex put his arm around Amber.

As suddenly as the ground started moving, it stilled.

A loud crash sounded from the ravine. More crashing and rolling echoed as boulders and trees tumbled.

Alex's face turned pale.

Amber jumped up, grabbed Fortune's reins, and ran around the brush pile.

As she reached the ravine, the devastation mushroomed in front of her. Brush that had been along the sides was now piled at the

bottom. There was no way they could have safely explored it in the morning.

She took a deep breath, knowing she had been down amongst the brush only moments before.

Alex came up behind her. He held his hand over his eyes as he tried to see through the spiraling dust cloud, thickening darkness racing to overtake them.

"Help!"

"I don't know that voice," Amber whispered.

"Help, down here." Someone grunted in the ravine.

More brush crashed below them.

She shivered. A deserted mountain was no place to have unexpected company so close to her and her friends.

"Wait a minute," Alex yelled.

Corbo and Livia ran up behind them.

"Who is it?" Corbo said.

"Doesn't matter, we need to save them," Livia said.

"Trapped under a log."

Alex grabbed his flashlight from his pack and started down.

Livia was right behind him.

"Amber, you and Corbo stay there. We may need a rope." Alex slid through the fallen brush.

Corbo ran back to their packs for a rope.

Alex slipped and slid down the slope. Small rocks and pebbles, already disturbed, slid down to the bottom of the ravine.

"There he is," Alex said. "Is there anyone else with you?"

"Not here. Please help."

The light from the flashlights shook and swayed as Alex and Livia worked to free the man.

Amber leaned closer.

The darkness kept Alex and Livia invisible. As they moved further away, their voices became too low to hear.

The ground under her feet stirred.

Amber fell to the ground so she wouldn't roll into the ravine below. She crawled closer to the edge to watch.

The ground rumbled as rocks and trees slipped and slid further down on top of the already shifted debris.

A high-pitched scream, echoed from below.

Amber peered over the edge.

Light bounced eerily from the flashlights across the night sky.

Groans resonated as more branches fell, and Alex yelled.

The ground stilled.

It was a relief.

She and Corbo needed to climb down and reach Alex and Livia quickly. Another quake could happen, and they could be hurt too. She couldn't leave Alex down there.

As she stood and started to slip down the side of the ravine, Corbo grabbed her arm.

"Wait a minute. Let's call to them first."

"Alex? Livia? Are you okay?" Amber leaned forward as she listened.

"We're here. Livia says her ankle hurts."

"Can you climb?" Corbo asked.

"I'll have to try. We had a spot cleared out before that quake. Ugh."

Brush shifted down below them.

"Do you need us down there?"

A large limb fell. Rocks scattered, cascading down the hill.

"No Amber. Stay there. I will help Livia out first. Corbo can help me carry the man out."

Corbo took a few steps down the embankment.

Amber shined her light on him.

Corbo waited, not moving.

Branches and rocks scattered below them. Moments crept by waiting on Alex and Livia to scramble through the debris filled trail.

At least the faults had calmed, for the moment.

Heavy footsteps broke branches nearby.

Alex stepped into the light carrying Livia. "Take her to camp Corbo. Amber, go take care of her." He was breathing hard.

Alex placed Livia in Corbo's arms.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and whispered in his ear.

Alex's left arm had not held her. It hung limp at an odd angle. He slumped down as Corbo turned to walk towards camp.

Amber rushed to him. "Are you okay?"

"I will be. Have to. Find some sticks. To set the arm. As soon as. We help. The other person. Up." Alex panted. "Go to Livia. Hurt her ankle."

Amber waited until Corbo returned, then ran to stay with Livia. Though they hadn't seen many animals nearby, there might be a few predators around here. Livia couldn't fend them off. As she rounded the corner of brush, she reached out her hand to rub

Fortune's face as she passed. The warm breath on her hand comforted her as the evening chill settled in.

Livia rested with her head on her backpack. Her pale face shone in the gathering dark.

Amber rushed to her own backpack to grab the first aid supplies.

"What do you need?"

"It's my right ankle. It twisted as I fell under the tumbling brush."

Amber shined the light on the ankle. The first round of swelling had passed. The next round would take time. She wrapped Livia's ankle. "If it's too tight later, let me know."

Livia nodded. "The man was trying to help us. He won't say much."

"Do you know him?"

"No." Livia winced as Amber tucked in the end of the wrap.

"Wish I had matches to start the fire."

"Corbo does. He'll start it when he comes back." Livia pulled herself up to a sitting position. "Is it done now? Will it move more?"

Amber pulled her pack over next to Livia. "No. Next quake may be anytime, or a hundred years from now."

Livia groaned.

A string of piano chords broke the gathering darkness.

"My phone is in my backpack," Livia said.

Amber found the phone and handed it to her as the music stopped.

Livia groaned as she answered it. "Hi Josie. No please don't. Don't pray for the quakes to continue! I'm on a mountain, and I'm not going down until we reach the top."

Livia grabbed a stick and poked at the empty fireplace. "No Josie. You can't come." She ended the conversation with a groan and dropped the phone in her lap.

"You okay?"

"She still thinks I can make you stop the quakes. Now she wants to have a group come pray over me so I will do what they want me to do. What is going on?" Livia trembled.

Amber touched her arm. The trembling continued. If Livia started crying, she didn't know what she would do.

"Call your mom. Maybe she can help," Amber said.

Livia squeezed her hand. "Mom's never helped before. I don't want her to know I'm hurt. I don't know what she would do."

Amber understood. Mothers could be confusing sometimes. Her own mother often seemed closer to Karen than to her. Livia had

nothing in common with Karen. If it were Karen with a hurt ankle, she'd hug her, and they'd tell stories to keep her mind off the pain.

"Tell me about the group," Amber said.

Livia shifted against the backpack. "They are an interesting group of people. Josie and Nathan I've known since first grade. We used to play together on weekends. Mom would drop me off, so I didn't interfere with the mass of customers at the deli."

Amber listened. She had never been told to stay out of the way. "My mom wanted me to help, and I wanted that to. Did you want to work in the deli?"

Brush tumbled in the ravine.

Fortune nickered.

"Never thought about it," Livia said. "Josie and Nathan joined a church group, and we would run around helping others to clean up and restore the local community. Sometimes, we rescued and ran Mexicans in and out of the country, to visit family members. Somehow, something changed after the leaders decided they wanted to revert the community to its original condition, and use it as desert farmland."

Limbs crashed near the lip of the ravine.

"Don't see how," Amber said.

"Almost there." Corbo stepped around the brush.

Amber's flashlight revealed Alex and Corbo supporting a man between them. The man was extremely pale. They helped him sit down, and Amber grabbed her bag. "I'm not sure how many supplies I have left."

The man groaned as his twisted leg touched the ground. "Thanks."

"I'll be back in a few minutes." Alex trudged off. His left arm dangled.

"Let Corbo go." Amber said.

Alex ignored her.

"What can we do for you?" Amber turned to the injured man.

He pointed to the pack Corbo had carried up.

Amber opened it.

A rabbit dripped blood over the contents.

The pack spun as dizziness threatened. Her food rose in her throat. She sat the pack down. "Your dinner?"

He tried to shake his head. The motion moved his left leg, causing him to groan. "Yours. Trying to help."

Amber handed the bag to Corbo. "You know more than I do,

please."

Corbo took the bag, opened it, and pulled out the rabbit. He lit the fire and prepared to skin the rabbit.

Amber looked back to the man.

"Who are you? Why are you offering to help?"

The man watched Corbo skin the rabbit. "Can't tell you. Trust me."

"How bad is the leg?"

The man shook his head.

Alex returned with three long sticks, and several shorter ones. "Okay," he said to the stranger. "Time to check your leg."

Amber turned the light toward the stranger's leg.

His lower left leg bent to the left. He wasn't walking out of here. "I don't want to call you 'the man,' is there anything we can call you?"

The man thought for a moment. "Call me Guide, I am a trail guide." He groaned as Alex shifted his leg with one arm, preparing it to be splinted.

Alex turned to Amber. "You'll have to splint his leg, then my arm. I have more rope in my pack. I don't know anything else to use."

Amber splinted Guide's leg while Corbo held the limbs tight to it.

Alex sat close by and held his arm.

She reached over and pulled his shirt back to see the damage in the firelight. "I hope you haven't made your arm worse."

He grinned at her. "Nope. Inflamed it enough so that it will be all the more ready to move." He groaned as Corbo adjusted his arm bones and held them.

Amber splinted it, and took an extra shirt she had in her pack to make a sling for him.

"I guess we go back for medical treatment tomorrow. What about Guide?"

"Go without me," Guide said. "People know where I am."

Her hair stood on end. "Good people, or not?"

"Good people. They will find me tomorrow. Go on." Guide motioned toward the mountain.

"We have to go back. Alex has a broken arm, and Livia can't walk."

"Amber," Alex's good hand was on her shoulder. "We can ride. Going on is the only option. We have to. No one else has the knowledge we do, and can reach here in time. As soon as the rabbit is done, we will sleep a few hours."

"Livia will need help."

"Corbo will help her up on the horse. She doesn't need her ankle to ride. She'll be more comfortable up there anyway."

"Rabbit's done," Corbo said.

Amber's eyes watered as she separated the rabbit and dished out the beans. Only a snack for five people. It was far more than they had before. It might be more than they would have for a while to come.

Chapter 29

Magdalena Peak, New Mexico

Amber's phone buzzed her awake. She lifted her head from Alex's arm and reached for her phone.

"Hi Mom. We're safe for the moment."

"You sure? That was a 6.9 last night."

Amber gulped. She knew it had been bad.

"There's more news," her mom said.

"Is Brandon okay?"

"He's fine. Dr. Rebecca said to tell you Livia's friends and a few hundred scared people marched on the Santa Fe courthouse last night. They scattered as the quake hit."

Amber groaned. So that's where Josie called from. No wonder she had been so worked up. Thankfully, she had no idea where Amber, Alex, Livia, and Corbo were, or she would have tracked them down as they slept. If the roads were passable.

"Thanks Mom. Will call you in a few hours."

In the light from her phone, and the fire's dying embers, Guide's eyes blazed. Who could he be, and why was he here?

She shook Alex awake.

He stirred the embers to warm the leftover rabbit bits. Roasted rabbit had been a good meal. No one knew when, or where, the next meal would come. Her stomach churned.

Breakfast was a silent meal as the sun leaked through the steam above them.

Corbo helped Livia on her horse and led them away from the campsite.

At least Livia hadn't complained this morning when Amber checked her ankle. A few aspirin were all she had left in the first aid kit. They would have to do for Livia until they reached help.

When Guide realized two were all she had, he had refused even one.

"It's okay for me to be in pain. I'll be gone soon. Livia and Alex need them more than me."

Alex looked away as well. "Save mine for Livia."

Amber turned on Fortune's back one last time to be sure Guide

was okay.

They had left him resting beside the burned out fire, at his request. He hadn't moved.

Dawn's rays blinked colorfully through the smoky haze from the top of Magdalena Peak. Brush covered the trail they had followed the evening before.

If the scene weren't so deadly, it would be beautiful. Fault lines and a napping volcano slumbered beneath their feet. Social faults rifted in the capital city. Her mom and Dr. Rebecca depended on her and Alex to call back with data soon.

Amber rode up beside Alex.

"Are you sure you can ride with one hand?"

He lifted his right arm, which held the reins. "Sure, one hand is all I need. The other can rest. These horses are gentle."

They reached the ravine and searched for a trail through the brush.

Bushes rustled behind her.

Guide groaned.

"Don't look back. Whoever he is, he doesn't want us to know. Don't worry. I think he is safe. We have a job ahead of us." Alex leaned forward and searched for a path through the desolation.

Amber held on tight as her horse stumbled down the trail through the ravine.

Fortune side stepped, and slid before she reached the bottom. She stopped Fortune for a moment to examine a rock formation with her flashlight. The group ahead of her moved out of sight along the trail, so she urged her horse to follow.

Corbo led them through the scrub brush, stopping occasionally to verify they were pointed in the correct direction.

Alex's phone chimed.

The tune in the early morning air reminded Amber of church clocks in the city.

Alex pulled his phone out. "Hi Dad. Sure. We're okay."

Amber snorted. They were far from fine.

"Glad Tom made it home safe." Alex glared at Amber.

"The event last night was bad. Think it was nearby. We should be at the peak in an hour or so." Alex listened, sitting as still as he could. "Sure Dad. We will call you as soon as we arrive."

Alex ended the call. "Your mom called my dad to update him. They aren't sure if it is a new fault, or a previously undetected fault. The results from the volcano monitoring are coming in. Our work,

and Dr. Rebecca's students, will make a difference."

"It's not good ahead." Corbo pointed at the trail of smoke they had been riding toward.

"The smoke cloud is getting thicker. We are risking our lives. Someone has to do it. Can you contact Brandon, or Dr. Evan, for an update before we trudge onward? We need a water break anyway." He reached for his backpack to find a water bottle.

Amber called Brandon. Her signal was weak here, though Alex's call had come through. "Hi Brandon. Don't ask questions. No time. What's your update?"

"Amber, are you safe?"

"Yes."

"More gas worries. That event last night caused a massive explosion in one of the mines. A whole section collapsed. May have to move the canaries somewhere else, or we may lose them."

Amber laughed. "At least they aren't real canaries. Which gasses?"

Brandon relayed the gasses released at the mines, and their concentrations. "They aren't quite the expected type for earthquakes."

"Can you repeat the list to Alex?"

"Sure."

Amber rode up beside Alex and handed him her phone. She waited while Alex listened.

"Thanks Brandon. We have to go. We are way behind schedule here. There may not be enough time." He flipped the phone closed, and handed it to Amber. "Corbo, lead us as fast as you can!"

Something crashed in the ravine behind them.

Amber turned Fortune to check. The movement jerked her head. Nothing visible. She raced off to catch up with Livia at the back of the line.

The horses trotted through the rough terrain. Here the trail didn't have much brush over it. One fallen stump was cleared in jumper style by the horses.

Livia groaned each time they swerved on a curve.

The hill they climbed was steeper than she expected from the picture on her map. Evidence of recent landslides littered the hill and valleys below. A few rocks tumbled as they passed a dry stream bed.

The column of smoke thickened, and edged closer.

Alex caught up with Corbo. They talked quietly.

Livia rode beside Amber. Her face was pale. Though she hadn't complained about the pain.

"How is your ankle?"

"The wrap is okay. Not too tight. Thanks for your help."

Alex turned to her. "Amber, you and Livia stay here. Corbo and I are going on. Be back in a few minutes." He pulled a small COSPEC from his pack.

"Alex, I want to go too."

"It's too dangerous for four. We would be in each other's way. Please, wait here, and be ready to go back to camp as soon as possible." Alex handed her his pack. "Keep it here."

"You'll need it." Amber pushed it back.

Alex shook his head. "I might drop it. It has all the equipment I have left. If we don't return quickly, or the volcano erupts, go back to camp."

To stand on an active volcano would be the dream of a lifetime, though, a nightmare as well. If the ground shifted, they might fall. If the volcano had an open caldera, one of the team might die.

"Okay, how far back?" Her shoulders slumped.

"The last clump of trees. We will be back in a few minutes. It won't take long to look, and take a reading." Alex led off with Corbo close behind.

She grabbed the bridle on Livia's horse, and turned her around. As soon as the men were out of sight, they walked to the clump of trees and waited.

The minutes seemed to drag on.

Twigs snapped around her.

Amber hoped they were squirrels and nothing more. Squirrels might not even naturally live in New Mexico. Maybe they were prairie dogs? She stifled a giggle that she knew more about the earthquake faults in the state than the current wildlife population.

The horses scattered pebbles and galloped back into view.

Alex raced downhill ahead of Corbo. They slowed down. "Let's go. Back to the camp. We'll tell you what we saw then."

The ride back was much quicker than the ride up the hillside had been. The trail swerved through the fallen brush. When they reached the ravine, Alex led them to the left before descending swiftly to the bottom. He stopped a moment for Amber to glance at the damage done by the recent events. Then, they urged the horses up and out on the other side. In a few moments, they were back at their campsite.

Guide was nowhere to be seen.

Amber slid off her horse and tied her up to the brush. The lead was long enough that the horse could reach good grass.

Corbo helped Livia.

Amber glanced at the ashes of the campfire. "Someone has been here."

In the ashes were a few cans of beans and nuts. Not much. It was a meal, more than they had.

"Guide's friends left us food. That's good," Livia said.

"I hope he is okay." Amber opened a can of beans, pulled a camp spoon out of her pack, ate few bites, and passed it around. An explosive lunch, like the peak above them.

Alex laughed. "He is plenty strong. He'll be fine." He fished the rest of cans out of the ashes, and placed them at his side.

"The gas meter registered similar to Brandon's did in the mines. It may not recognize a few he listed for us, being a smaller portable unit. The volcano's caldera looks like an open sore. It isn't oozing lava out the top. Below the surface, magma bubbles a few feet down. The heat seeped through the ground under my feet. It's dangerous to remain here for long."

He took a twig and twirled it. "So, what to do? We are about half a mile from the main trail. No tourists are out here, thankfully. A few minutes back to the road."

"What would your dad say?" Amber asked.

Alex nodded. "Time to report in." He pulled out his phone and called.

"Dad, what are the deformation stats?" Alex paused a moment. "Hot ground under foot. Open caldera with visible magma. Lots of steam."

Alex recited the gases he and Brandon had measured.

Amber grabbed the food cans to stuff them in her backpack.

A tremor wafted through the ground. It lasted a few seconds. Limbs shook, and a few loose ones fell. As the ground settled, a loud crash sounded in the direction of the ravine.

The boulder she had seen at the top of the ravine must have fallen. If it fell in one direction, it would stretch across the trail they had followed up the mountain not long ago. She shuddered.

Alex closed his phone and turned to the group. "Dad says the deformations are bad. The peak has risen at least two feet in two days according to GPS satellites. We have to hurry."

"The horses can't run fast enough," Livia said. "We will never

make it to safety in time."

Amber shook Fortune's blanket out, and settled it on her back. It would be a long ride.

Alex shifted his pack on his back as he settled on his horse. "We'll ride back to the road and hope. We have to reach both the Jornada del Muerto basin and the northern San Andres fault near the Trinity site."

"The basin is on the base. It's well guarded by cameras and fences." Corbo said.

Alex turned to him. "We will have to try. We may have to split up."

"That is three days' travel by horseback, at least ninety miles any way we can go. Even pushing them, two days wouldn't be enough. We have enough food for two meals," Livia groaned.

"One step at a time Livia. Let's ride to the road, and across it first." Alex turned his horse toward the road.

Amber followed. She pulled out her phone to call her mom. "Mom, please. Are you okay?"

"Yes, are you?"

"Fine. I'm worried."

"Dr. Rebecca has run the reports you recommended. We still need to check a few more things. There will be another meeting soon. General Nord won't see us until then, especially with the march going on."

"Wish it would end so they could focus on the real problems."

"I know. Stay safe."

Amber closed her phone. Her mom would do what she could. Amber had been right, at least. Only now, more problems had been added.

Alex peeked through the bushes by the road. He let out a low whistle. "Stay here, and don't make a sound."

He slid off his horse and walked forward.

A few minutes later, Alex returned smiling.

"Off, and quiet. Lead the horses, one person at a time and follow me. No questions."

Amber slid down and took Fortune's reins. She glanced out through the bushes, and watched as Alex led his horse to the trailer they had ridden in the night before. As soon as he and his horse were in the trailer, she glanced up and down the road. No traffic, so she pulled the reins; and hurried across the road, and into the trailer herself.

Inside, she and Fortune hurried to Alex and his horse.

Alex tied the horse up.

Champ, Windy's silent friend, held up his finger for silence; and motioned Amber forward to the small section closest to the truck. Amber glanced back as Livia on her horse came into the trailer. She walked forward to sit beside Alex on a hay bale.

Corbo arrived and tied up his horse. He took Livia's hand, helped her down, and carried her towards the hay bales.

Champ closed the rear doors and returned with his phone in his hand. "A few minutes."

Amber rolled a few pieces of hay in her hands as they waited.

A vehicle passed.

Silence greeted them. Inside the trailer, the heat stifled them. Sweat trickled down her neck.

The next vehicle stopped and the door opened and closed. It sped off.

The back door slid open.

Windy stepped around the horses. She nodded to them. "Good news. Guide will be fine thanks to the good care you gave him. You treated my brother well. Alex, let me look at your arm."

Alex held out his left arm and sling for her to see.

"Not perfect, has it slipped some?" Windy touched the bandages and sticks holding his arm together.

He winced and nodded.

"Brave soul. Good." Windy turned to Livia. "Let me see your ankle."

Livia stretched out her right leg and winced. "It's not easy to stretch out."

"Sit on the double stack and let it dangle a few minutes," Windy said.

Livia struggled to stand up.

Corbo picked her up, and placed her on top of the hay bales.

Windy gently took Livia's right ankle in her hand. She unrolled the wrappings and held her hands on the red, swollen area.

Livia gasped, and pulled back.

Windy looked up at her, rewrapped her foot, and glanced at Amber. "You would make a good trail nurse. Thank you. Alex, in a few words, what did you see at the peak?"

"The ground was hot beneath my feet, a fresh caldera in the ground about the size of a dinner table, with visible magma. A few fissures developed off in the distance. I didn't take the time, or risk

further injury, to check them out. Too much steam, and too many dangerous gas emissions, to stay long."

"Good report. Two of you need medical care."

"My dad says we don't have much time. The horses aren't fast enough for us to reach where we need to go in time."

"First, is medical care."

"We have to check Jornada del Muerto. We have no money for medical care." Alex said.

Livia laughed. "That is doable. There are plenty of legit clinics for those without money. Good medical care too, and the doctors don't ask questions. Unless, they recognize you from a wanted poster."

Windy nodded. "First the clinic. One is near the Jornada del Muerto basin. Then, we will see. Stay quiet back here. Corbo, Livia may want to be on the floor so she doesn't fall, as we go around turns. See you in about an hour." Windy patted each of the horses, as she and Champ went out.

The truck doors slammed and the engine started.

Amber snuggled closer to Alex. "I want your arm to heal right. You will need it the rest of your life."

He put his good arm around her, as they turned a corner on the road.

"Windy knew where we needed to go. I think she has had people following us, and watching, and not just her brother."

"She had to be sure we were who we said we were," Livia said. "And doing what we said we were doing. She's not one of my group. I don't know what group she is part of."

"We don't know who they actually are, or what they're really doing," Amber said.

"Do we need to know?" Corbo asked.

Amber relaxed. Sure, they wanted to know. These people probably weren't doing anything illegal. They were trying to keep from being hurt again by the descendants of those who had hurt them so many times before. Not sharing until, and unless, they had to. Windy taking time, gas money, and food, out of her pocket to help them was a blessing, and she couldn't complain.

Chapter 30

Immi Clinic, New Mexico

Alex leaned against the trailer wall.

Amber snuggled up to his shoulder.

She had done the best she could. Windy knew what was good trail medicine. He'd almost forgo the doctor visit if he was sure the break would heal on its own. Doctors would be swamped with more urgent emergencies than his. Livia definitely needed a doctor if she was to walk normally again.

The trailer stopped. The door opened, and Windy came in. "Try not to use your real names. I'll be in the waiting room when you come out. Don't come outside until then."

Alex waited until Corbo helped Livia stand up. She was having trouble with her leg, though she did her best not to show it.

Windy did not close the trailer door behind him.

A sign above the door on the adobe building. "Adobe House" in large letters. On the door, a taped paper sign hung with "Immi Clinic" in green.

Corbo grunted.

Amber opened the door.

Corbo helped Livia in.

An antiseptic odor wafted out over their heads.

A mass of adults, teens, and children milled around. Voices echoed as mothers admonished toddlers who chased each other under and around the legs of chatting adults.

A long wait could be dangerous, especially for Livia.

Corbo picked up and carried Livia so no child would knock her down.

They moved along the wall, trying to figure out where to go. There appeared to be no available seating in the room, and no reception desk.

A woman carrying a clipboard walked up to them. "How many?"

"Two," Alex said. "Broken arm, and twisted or broken ankle." He pointed to Livia.

The woman checked off her clipboard. "Right. This way to x-ray."

Children and adults parted so they could pass. "Don't worry.

Most of these are worried family members."

The woman stopped at a dingy door, and opened it, waving at Alex and Livia. "Here you go, both of you right through this door. You two," she waved towards Corbo and Amber, "please wait out here."

Alex squeezed Amber's hand.

Corbo sat Livia down carefully.

Amber handed her walking stick to her.

Livia hopped through the door.

The woman handed Alex a paper to fill out. The pen was one of those cheap giveaways that businesses hand out to remind people they exist.

He walked into the room and leaned up against the wall to fill in the forms for him and Livia.

The form's name line was marked out. Only gender, current issue, and other health problems had empty spaces.

A few people waited on wooden benches in the smaller room. Another woman walked up, looked at the paper, and helped Livia into a darker closet, deeper into the building.

Time crept by as Alex ignored the pain in his arm, and conversations in Spanish he could not understand.

Livia hobbled back out.

"We have to wait here until they read the results," she said.

Alex took his turn in x-ray. A gurney and chest x-ray machine took up all the available closet space. The technician stood in a cabinet barely large enough to turn around in.

He returned to the waiting area to see Livia on chair with her leg propped on a bucket full of rags. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Be glad for it to be set."

One by one, a nurse called the other people. They all answered to some variant of "John," or "Jane."

A little boy with a bloody leg sat nearby on a man's lap.

"Don't forget, Johnny, don't forget," the man said.

The boy nodded, rubbed his eyes, and leaned against the man.

The man patted his back. "It'll be okay. I broke my leg when I was a bit older than you."

"Wanna run again." The boy looked up into the older man's eyes.

"You will. It'll be a while. You'll be chasing your younger sister and the chickens next spring."

The child nodded and leaned closer to the man, closing his eyes.

Running mattered to all children. Even a child couldn't outrun the

quakes. Events of today hurt everyone, regardless of age, or infirmity. The older man probably wished it had been him instead of the child.

"Was it the quake?" Alex asked the older man.

He nodded. "My son and daughter-in-law left my grandson to keep me company. He went for my water bucket, and a beam fell on his leg. If it had hit me, it would have been far worse."

The man meant he wouldn't have survived. Even here, speaking of death didn't occur openly. Or maybe the man felt he wouldn't understand such openness.

The technician came for the boy.

The older man stood up and walked to Alex. "How many died?"

Alex nodded. "I don't know. I wish I did."

"You look like you should know."

I should have asked my dad. "We've been collecting geographical data to save as many lives as we can. Until then, no one will listen."

"Listening." The man looked at him eagerly.

Alex looked around at the other people.

Silence had descended as he and the man talked.

He shook his head. No words could explain the situation.

The old man's shoulders slumped. He sat back down.

The nurse returned with the boy and patted Livia's shoulder. "You need a good wrap for that bad sprain Janey," she said.

Livia winced as she stood.

Alex helped her steady herself.

He waited, wishing there was something he could say to this man, and the others waiting in the room. Even if he did tell them the truth, where would they go? And, how would they go anywhere their feet couldn't take them? There must have been over two hundred people in the building, and less than twenty vehicles in the parking lot.

Another nurse returned for him. "Okay John, come this way. Your arm is rather bad. Your friend did a good job."

Alex followed, not asking any questions as Windy requested. What a way to save on paperwork, and protect identities. I wish I could give them my real name, and let my insurance pay them. The doctor set his arm. I'll have to find a way to send a donation when we are back home. That is, he winced as they wrapped the cast on his arm, if we ever are. Exploring active volcanoes and fault lines can be dangerous work.

After the plaster cast set, the nurse pointed him back out the door to where Livia, now on crutches, leaned against Corbo, and Amber waited on him. Glad to see his friends, he raised his wrapped arm. "You did a good job, they said."

Amber laughed and hugged him.

"Windy isn't back. Let's go stand near the door," Corbo said.

They moved through the mass of people. More doors led off in different directions. Different ailments were taken care of in different places. A far better, quicker, and safer idea than most places where contagious, and not, were thrown together.

"Which is the door that leads out?"

"I think, it's the one with the blue bowl over it," Livia said. "Blue signifies sky."

"Logical," Alex said. "Are those crutches helpful?"

"Sure are. At least, they will be when I'm used to them, and don't have to tangle with a forest of legs and running toddlers. I'm not complaining though."

"Better get used to it," Corbo said. "Out there is a real forest of boulders; and it will be even tougher."

"I know." Livia avoided a running toddler with her right crutch.

"Corbo?"

Alex turned to a woman who bore some resemblance to Corbo.

Corbo glanced at her. "Mom. What are you doing here?"

"Your dad was hurt. He was fixing a fence when the last quake hit. It fell on him. They are doing surgery." She wrung her hands.

Amber grabbed Alex's hand.

"Um. Mom, this is Livia. She and I are together."

The woman frowned. "Can we go outside and talk?"

Corbo shook his head. "No Mom. We are waiting on Windy."

"I'm here Corbo. Bring her with you." Windy stood near the door.

"We didn't hear you come in," Alex said.

She laughed. "As loud as it is in here, how can you hear anyone more than a few feet away? Come on."

Corbo helped Livia to the door, and outside.

Alex followed with Amber at his side.

Windy led them around the corner of the building, walking at a comfortable pace for Livia to adjust to crutches. A corral with dozens of horses covered the back of the building.

Windy turned to them. "Your horses have been let lose in the corral to refresh themselves. Let's go sit in the shade of the trailer over there."

They followed her to a trailer close to the one they had ridden in before. Windy brought out a folding canvas chair for Livia, while the rest sat on the ground. Windy turned to the new woman. "Tell us."

Shadows glanced across the face of the woman who was Corbo's aunt, not his mother, at least according to Livia's mom.

The woman sighed. Her hands fell into her lap. She looked up at Corbo, and feebly reached out. "Corbo, please forgive me. I always hoped."

A sob slipped out. "I tried. I wanted what was right. We didn't know so much. You are missed. Please come home."

Livia patted Corbo's hand. "Don't make her suffer."

Alex reached over to her. "Please don't."

She wiped her eyes.

Corbo's fists were clenched as he stared at the woman. "I know you aren't my real mom, and that your husband isn't my real dad. Why didn't you raise me as your full son, rather than as an unwanted nephew who you called son?"

Corbo's Aunt Anna burst into tears.

Livia glared at Corbo.

"Please, tell us your side of the story," Amber said.

She wiped her eyes and smiled at Amber.

Windy handed her a water bottle.

She drank some water. "Corbo, we hoped Eduardo would find us. We don't know if he is alive, or not."

"What happened that day? The day of the skirmish," Livia said.

The woman looked into the sky, far away. Her voice came, as if from outside her. "Jon, Adora, and I didn't make it to the border that day. We were late." Her hand shook. The water in the bottle sloshed.

"Corbo came early, the night before. We were a day's journey away." She closed her eyes.

"Adora was not fit to travel for three days. Jon watched to see if Eduardo would come looking for us. He didn't find him. We heard about the skirmish, and had no way to know if Eduardo was there. We tried to send a letter to his last known address."

"I don't think it made it there," Livia said. "Mom would have opened it if it had. She would have told us."

The woman nodded. "It is possible, as the letter had to pass through several hands before it reached the post office. We checked back monthly with family, and no one has ever received a letter from him. We keep hoping." She sobbed, gently this time, as Amber held

her close.

"Why did you never tell me? What happened to my mother?" Corbo was still as a stone, not allowing emotion to show on his face, or body.

She wrung her hands in her lap, and took another sip of water. "Your mom died a few months later, from a broken heart we think. She loved your dad so much. Everyone who ever met him loved him. That's why she fell in love with him when she met him on the reservation. We tried to tell you once, and then changed our minds. We decided to raise you as we did, and never tell you the truth until your father was found."

"I wish you hadn't. I never knew who I was. I don't even have a driver's license." Corbo clenched his hands and his voice deepened.

The woman's water bottle shook. "Our papers are lost too. We have no idea where they are. Eduardo must have died somewhere; holding the papers, and maybe the letter telling of your birth. If he was hurt in that skirmish, he may have died in a hospital, or clinic like the one behind us."

"Did you ever go to them, and try to find him?"

"No, Corbo, we were too scared. We didn't know where to go, or who to talk to after Adora died." Her hands shook as she tried to reach out for the man she had wronged.

Corbo backed away.

"You raised Corbo so differently than your own kids. Why didn't you go back?" Livia asked.

"My children were born here, so they have birth certificates. Corbo wasn't. Though his parents wanted him to be. The border was a day's walk further when he was born. We didn't know where to go when we came to this country without Eduardo. We wandered a long time. By the time we found someone who could have helped us verify Corbo's birth certificate; Adora was dead and couldn't give the necessary information. It was too late."

Windy nodded. "So you made a lot of mistakes?"

"We made many mistakes. Once we had children in the country, the authorities were less likely to send us back. We moved a lot, so no one would find out the truth. I am sorry Corbo, please forgive me." She reached her arms out, begging the man she had raised, and wronged.

Tears glistened on his cheeks. "You can never repair the damage. Where did my mother die? Where is she buried? I want to find where my father died," Corbo said.

His aunt nodded. "Your mother would be proud of you for striking out on your own. She was so independent. That's why she worked on the reservation part time. If she had lived, she would have contacted them for help."

His Aunt Anna took a sip of water. "Eduardo was supposed to be there, where the skirmish was. He was supposed to meet us, and bring all of us to his job at the university. He had our papers. Could the government have seized them, thinking the papers were fakes?"

Windy nodded. "Could be. They might not have even believed he was who he said he was. They might not have believed his own driver's license photo if he had other people's identification with him."

"Wouldn't they have tried to contact the people? Livia's mom for instance, who would have known him." Alex said.

"Nope," Windy said. "Not necessarily. If he died, they would have buried him; another causality of the border wars. If he lived, they may not have used his real name. He might be held with a generic name, and he may be languishing in federal prison on false document and smuggling illegal immigrants into the country charges."

"That wouldn't fit protocol, would it?" Alex said.

"No, Alex." Windy said. "Do you think I believe protocol? If it was always followed, where would I be living?"

That was true. Written rules were one thing. When challenged, they had to be followed. However, unspoken policies tended to rule many things, and were rarely challenged. "Where would you be Windy? We don't even know."

"I wouldn't exist. My ancestors belong to many tribes that would never have met. Some were at war with one another, before being forced to live on the same reservation."

Windy reached her hand out to Corbo's knee. "Though I don't know his exact heritage either; I can guarantee he wouldn't be facing this problem, if protocol were followed every time, as it should be."

"Corbo, please forgive me," the woman said.

"You never let me learn Spanish. You kept my culture from me!" He slammed his fist on the ground.

His aunt rubbed her eyes. "Corbo, we wanted more for you. Your dad, he wasn't Spanish. We hoped you could find your real heritage."

"Who was he?" Corbo took her hand.

She wiped her eyes.

Corbo glared at her. "I won't call you 'Mom' anymore. I don't even know what to call you. Do your sons and daughters know who I am?"

She sighed. "After you disappeared, we begged them to look for you. Finally, a year ago, we told them the truth. As I have told you."

Her hands twisted in her lap. "Desi was upset. He was gone a month looking for you. He said he found you. And you were safe, though he never spoke to you. He refused to tell us anything about where you were. He goes once every few months to check on you. He won't tell us where."

"Desi liked me best." Corbo smiled. "I haven't seen him. That means nothing. He is an excellent tracker, and good at hiding."

"That is what he said."

A nurse came around the trailer. "Miss Jane, John is now out of surgery."

Everyone laughed at how close to right she was.

Corbo's "Mom" tried to stand up.

Corbo offered her his hand. "I will walk inside with you. Livia needs me; and so do Alex and Amber."

Livia patted his hand.

His aunt nodded and followed the nurse back to the building.

Livia sighed. "I hope he can find peace now."

"Not until he finds his father," Alex said.

Windy handed out water bottles and snacks. "We wait until Corbo comes back. Livia, would you have gone with him if your ankle weren't wrapped?"

"No, he needs to talk to her alone without interruptions at this point. He knows I'm here for him."

Windy smiled and sat back, eating a piece of beef jerky.

Chapter 31

Immi Clinic and Jornada del Muerto Basin, New Mexico

Amber plucked at the dead grass at her feet. She tossed a pebble at the chair Livia sat in.

Livia turned to her. "What are you thinking?"

Amber sighed. "I understand what he's going through, kinda."

She glanced over at Windy. "If my dad ever came back, I wouldn't know him. I miss him. All of our pictures of him were lost in a fire. I don't even know what he looks like."

"How old were you when you last saw him?" Alex asked.

"We've known Karen and Brandon for twelve years. We all went on a trip together, and dad disappeared. Karen's mom died a year later, so I guess I was six or seven when he disappeared in South America."

She piled a group of gravel into a pyramid. "Not much hope of his returning, especially now."

Windy handed her a stick.

Amber placed it on the ground and gently covered it with gravel.

"I hope Corbo finds his dad," Amber said.

Windy nodded.

Alex finished his water and leaned against the side of the trailer.

"I'm back." Corbo walked into the circle.

"Is your 'Dad' okay?" Livia said.

Corbo winced. "I know. I've called him 'Dad' for eighteen years. Guess a little longer, until I decide what to call them, won't hurt."

He grabbed the water bottle Windy handed him. "He will be okay. Won't be repairing fences for a while. It'll be hard on them. They depend on him doing lots of heavy work." He tossed a handful of nuts in his mouth.

"I wish we could help them," Livia said. "Maybe he has information that your 'Mom' doesn't know."

"Not likely. He might be able to tell me what she thought of my parents. Windy, what do we do now? You put our horses in the corral."

"Don't worry about your former parents Corbo. They won't starve.

Your cousins are adults, or almost, now right?" Windy said.

He nodded while chewing beef jerky.

"Where you want to go, horses are too slow. Not that there is enough time anyway. A horse isn't safe in that terrain. I wouldn't want a lovely animal hurt, or shot."

Alex gulped and pulled Amber close with his good arm.

"I don't want you all hurt either. I have a plan. It will be dangerous, and extremely difficult. Much faster and safer than horses."

Amber shivered. "Why are you helping us? What do you want us to do for you?" She'd help, if she could.

Windy softened, looking more feminine than before, a smile in eyes. "Yes Amber, I do want something. As all of my people do. We want to know the cause. We don't believe the military is completely to blame. And, if the military is forced to pull out; perhaps we can take more of our land back, caring for it the way a good guardian does."

"Your reservation, what we saw, didn't seem overcrowded. Do you think they would give the land back to you?" Amber really wanted to know. After all, land should belong to everyone, not to one group of people. A world at peace with itself, and those in it would be relaxing. Time spent traveling, learning. Limited resources would be less limited, as more people created.

"They would give it to us. The least desirable people in their eyes, to ranch, and watch. Our potential deaths wouldn't matter to them. We could bring the land back to life and make it safe once again. While the area you explored looked under populated, that is because most of our people live in clusters, or off the reservation, trying to make a living in the modern way."

Windy waved her arms. "Look around you. What do you see? This vast semi-desert expanse cannot support many people. It takes acres and acres to support the cattle and sheep that feed our hungry children in the villages. They crowd together so that the animals, the people's food, have more forage to eat, and can better grow into healthy meat. Which means our children are almost as divorced from their food as other modern children. They see the cows, sheep, goats, and pigs a few times a year at ranch events."

Amber nodded. Windy knew. Just because Amber knew what the land needed, didn't mean lots of other people did too. Like the materialistic kids she had known in public school. They wouldn't know how to survive out here in the desert. Livia was only a little

better. And only, because she had lived here all her life.

"You want us to go to the base?" Alex asked.

"I want you to find out what you can. Check for recent nuclear testing sites." Windy handed them a brochure with known testing sites marked on it.

"Find out what is happening to the Jornada del Muerto basin, and in the Northern San Andres Fault. Can you do that?" She watched him closely.

"On foot?" Alex asked.

Windy beckoned and walked to the trailer. She pulled the doors open.

Amber peered in.

Behind the doors were the two four-wheelers that had been on her ranch days before. The first one was a mud splattered dark green. It didn't look dangerous. Rain would be a problem. At least they wouldn't have to worry about feeding and watering the vehicles. Speed, and distance, would increase greatly.

Alex gulped. "On those? I've never driven one before."

Amber jumped up. Maybe I'll have a chance to learn to drive. Mom promised I could this year. I never needed to learn before. The new driver's training laws had made learning while in school next to impossible. Who could learn to drive in daylight only, when they were in school from sun up to sun down?

Windy laughed. "Relax. What you need to know is; you have a four-gallon tank, so you should have 80 to 100 miles of fuel. About fifty miles from here, if the land was flat, is the San Andres fault deep in the White Sands Military Base. You will need two tanks, so a five-gallon side tank of gas is provided. Try to keep the speed low, around 30 miles per hour, and watch the ground. The four wheelers are safe and can handle rough ground. Be careful."

"That's a lot of miles," Amber said.

"Can we reach the base from here?" Alex glanced at her.

Windy nodded. "I'll show Amber where to go through the fence, while you and Corbo drive out your new transportation."

Windy handed him a key and walked over to Amber.

Alex stepped into the trailer.

"Can you drive with one arm?" Amber asked.

Alex nodded. "I think I can. Guess I'll find out."

He climbed onto the first four-wheeler.

Corbo set out the ramps for him and Alex to back down.

He pulled around and waited while Windy and Amber talked.

"Across the plain is the Jornada del Muerto lava flow and volcano. Be careful there. Follow the flows until you reach a lava cave. It was built by some of our ancestors." Windy marked the cave and the path on the brochure.

"A mile or so beyond is the fence. Antelope and deer have knocked the weakened fence over in the last few quakes trying to escape. Cross carefully. This area has no cameras, as it isn't a typical access point."

Amber nodded.

"Alex and Corbo will pick up the path from there. Trails may have cameras at intersections. Stay safe and careful. You can do this."

Amber gulped. "Sure it's safe?"

Windy handed her the brochure. "We'll be watching you at all times. Keep your phone off from the time you reach the base until you return."

Windy shook her hand.

Amber ran over to Alex, and climbed on behind, holding onto his waist. Chills streamed up and down her spine.

Corbo drove up beside him and parked. He walked over to help Livia up.

Windy folded up the chair, and as Corbo helped Livia on, she strapped it to the front of his luggage area between the gas can and her. She pulled four helmets out of the trailer and handed them around.

"Good luck. Come back here when you have news. Champ will be here caring for the horses. He often does." She stepped back, and the wind grabbed a wisp of her hair.

Alex took the trail toward the basin. "Amber, you'll have to give me directions."

Amber nodded as she pulled the helmet on. She hugged him and pulled to the right.

The terrain grew more difficult. Stream tracks of millennia old lava broke the landscape into more of a moonscape. Their route went over dips and rises, almost ruts as the dried lava streams became larger.

Alien lava fields reminded Amber of the moon. Little grew here. Sweat trickled down her back. Off in the distance was one of the landmarks Windy had mentioned.

Amber pulled back on Alex, and pushed her knees against his legs.

He stopped and Corbo pulled up beside them.

Amber let go.

"That'll take some getting used to." She hopped down. She pulled her pack around and opened it, looking for something. "We need to stop here a few minutes and look. Plenty of time. A cave hollowed out of lava rocks nearby will protect us until nightfall."

"Will we be traveling in the dark?" Alex asked.

"Yes."

"Won't we need to turn our lights on?"

She looked up as she pulled out her tiny hammer and chisel. "If we need to. The moon should be bright. Come on Alex, we can chip a few spots of lava rock here, and go down, and see if it's the same. We may not be able to scientifically compare the composition. However, a field comparison is good."

"What about Corbo and Livia?"

"They can wait on us, or go on ahead. We won't go far. Corbo, across the field that way." She pointed. "Is the lava hut. It is close to the edge of the field here, and as close to the service road as we dare go until dark."

"Okay, Livia needs to be out of the sun anyway." Corbo started his vehicle up, and drove on in the direction Amber indicated.

Amber squatted, watching them go on. Once they drove out of sight; she sighed, and chipped at the rock. "Come on, you're the expert," she said.

He stepped down. "Why did you send them on?"

Setting the hammer on the rock, she looked up to him and said, "Alex, they are a couple, have been for a while. They have had almost no alone time together for five days. Corbo has gone through a stressful time."

She tapped a rock. "Right now, their relationship is as shaky as the ground we are standing on. We are all in this geologic mess together. They don't consider us friends. And they need to talk now, without us. Even if they do give us a summary later." She turned back to her work.

Alex squatted down and examined the lava. "Where is the main caldera here? I think I should have asked Dad what type of deformation was going on here."

Amber pointed southeast of where Corbo had gone. "It's over there. Let's go." She dropped the pieces she had chipped off into a plastic bag, and pushed it back into her pack.

There was no trail. It lay to the south. Soon, they reached the opening to the ancient caldera. The steep walls towered on either

side. This would not be a good place to be if the lava started to flow. Walls would hold some of the lava from the main fields, for a while. They might escape if they were lucky.

When they reached the point where the corridor opened into the caldera, Alex stopped, turned the four-wheeler around, and parked.

Amber hopped off, and reached down to feel the ground. She frowned and stepped forward.

Chapter 32

Jornada del Muerto Basin, New Mexico

Alex stared at the crater of dried lava. Jornada del Muerto was shield volcano, like those in Hawaii. The look and texture showed that serious trouble would be brewing if this volcano awoke unexpectedly from its slumber. If new lava tubes formed, and no one realized it, an explorer could pop one open by stepping in it, and die from burns.

Few plants had grown on the lava here. Unlike on Hawaii, where plant growth would recover in the cooled lava fields within a year or two. Of course, the lack of water here was partly to blame as well.

Alex had left his pole at the base, and regretted it. It would be difficult to determine if the ground was solid beneath them. The walking stick he had picked up by the creek side had been forgotten somewhere as well. With only one arm, he'd have to be careful. He didn't want to sit down, and have trouble standing back up.

Amber walked forward, then stopped to chip off a lava sample. Comparing it with her previous sample, they looked similar to the untrained eye.

To Alex, there was a good deal of visible change in the dried lava's composition. Alex bent over to look at the area where Amber was working.

She turned her head up inches from his face.

He flushed and stepped back. She could be thinking anything. He had agreed to take care of her, and he liked her, more every day. It seemed too soon, and too much to ask, since she was several years younger than him. Come to think of it, he didn't even know her exact age. If she was underage, he could be in serious trouble, no matter what he did, or didn't do. Not that she seemed like the type of person to say or do anything, one could never be too careful.

He staggered backward, and almost fell. His arms flailed. Ancient jagged lava caught his feet. His good arm grabbed a boulder.

Amber covered her mouth, to hide her laughter, though it shone in her eyes. "You didn't have to jump back. I don't bite."

"Sorry. A fear crossed my mind."

She took his hand. "Do I remind you of your mom?"

He swayed. Sure she did, in some ways. Not in so many others. "No Amber, not really. You are independent like she was."

He turned around to face her, and rested one arm on her shoulder. "Look, what my fear is. Guess we need to set a few records straight. You are eighteen, right?"

She looked at the ground and shuffled her toe. Glancing back up she said, "Does it matter?"

Alex sighed. "It shouldn't. I am sure we are both of a biological age of consent. Society has other opinions. A friend of mine." His voice trailed off.

He shook his head and closed his eyes. A high school friend had ended up in court, and jail, with a baby to support. He'd only been a few months older than his girlfriend. Barely eighteen when she, at seventeen announced she was pregnant. Sure, the grandmother regretted it now, that her son-in-law would never be able to legally work and support his wife and child. "I don't want that to happen to me. I don't want you, or your mom, to take something out of context, now, or later."

Amber put her hand on his hand, and removed it from her shoulder. "Not to play with your feelings. I kinda enjoy being able to pretend you are my knight protecting me from harm. I'm not far off from legal age. And am far more mature than the kids I go to school with. Or, is that went to school with? Since I have no idea what my assignments are these days."

Alex laughed. "Some knight I am. I'm the one with the broken arm."

"Easy for me to escape unwanted attention then. Of course, maybe I'm not worried." Amber giggled and play slapped his good arm.

Alex took the ignition key and dangled it. "I hold the keys."

"To the four-wheeler, or my heart?" Amber grabbed the keys and ran.

Alex followed laughing.

The ground began to shake.

Amber halted, panting.

Alex caught up with her, and grabbed her shoulder, pulling her close.

They watched the ground move.

A fumarole rose a foot or more on the northeast side of the ancient caldera.

Lava dribbled out the top. It was slow, like Hawaii lava. It

meandered down the side, and toward them along the ridges of previous flows.

The last eruption had been 760,000 years before. Now, it gurgled beneath their feet. With this type of lava, they could probably safely grab a sample.

A thunderous sound escalated behind them.

He turned. An ancient boulder of dried lava had crashed to the ground from the opening of the narrow six-hundred-foot long tunnel into the caldera.

If the sides crashed, they could be trapped, with no escape.

He glanced across the caldera. There might be an opening on the opposite side. He didn't want to take the chance.

Amber glanced at him, pecked his cheek with a kiss, and ran back to the four-wheeler.

Alex's heart leapt as he ran after her. Chills raced up and down his spine. Whether from Amber, or the volcano, he wasn't sure.

Amber stuffed the new samples in her bag, closed it, and jumped on before he reached her.

He climbed on. "Sure you don't want fresh samples?"

Amber grinned. "You are the volcano expert. What do you think?"

He glanced back at the fumarole. A chance in a lifetime. No one here to know if something goes wrong. And, no recent history on this thing? "Let's hurry!"

He grabbed the key she dangled beside him.

He drove as quickly as he dared down the long tunnel. He chuckled, thinking of what the Native Americans likely called this birth canal shaped formation. If they didn't, it was an apt description, especially now.

As soon as they were out of the narrow pass, he pulled to the side a moment to look back at the caldera.

Steam spiraled upwards from the fresh lava flow. They, however, were in no condition to grab any samples. Him with a broken arm. Her unable to drive. Corbo would be waiting on them. This volcano, new as it was, yet ancient at heart, would have to wait. Another time, another team, perhaps. He picked his way through the remains of the ancient lava flow. New lava would fill the old ruts. It may take days, or weeks, depending on how much pressure had already been released.

A tremor near here could be deadly as the ground would shift, and might toss them in the air. He picked a path through the maze.

Near the time Alex thought they should be approaching where Corbo and Livia were, Amber squeezed her legs around his back.

He stopped and turned off the motor.

She jumped off, glanced around. "Don't look."

Grinning, he turned back to look for the lava hut.

"Okay. Wanted to be done before camp. Call your dad right quick, and let him know what we saw. They will expect us to make a camp and rest a bit before we go on."

"I don't have much battery left."

"Windy said she had a plan. Not sure what it is. She said not to worry."

Alex dialed his dad while Amber climbed back on.

"Hey Dad. What do you know about the Jornada del Muerto Basin?"

"Well, son, it's bulging, like all the other volcanoes."

Alex grinned. He knew something his dad didn't know. A first, and hopefully the last, on volcanoes. "A fresh fumarole with a leaky caldera greeted us. Had to keep our distance."

"Be careful. That volcano has dammed the Rio Grande in the past."

"Hey Dad?"

"Yes son?"

"How old were you, when you and mom started dating?"

His dad laughed. "Does that matter now? I was about your age, maybe a little older, not much though. Why do you ask?"

Alex's cheeks felt hot. "Um. No reason. I miss Mom."

"We all do son. We all do." His dad's voice sounded tired. "If she were here, she and I would be where you are. You know that, don't you? We both wanted you to finish your studies."

"I know Dad. I'm glad I am here. This is my first real field experience. Nothing against Hawaii. It's home to me. I've been there all my life. A real live volcano is a fascinating experience." Alex tried to hide the excitement from his voice. Didn't want his dad to think he would jump into one. He'd call him home for sure then.

His Dad sighed. "You're right son. We never took you traveling. Maybe we should have. Tom said you might have found a girlfriend. Make sure she's smart, as well as pretty."

"Oh, she is." Alex glanced back to determine if Amber heard what they were discussing.

She giggled.

"I better go. We have to make camp."

"Be careful, and take care son. All of you out there."

Alex closed his phone to put it away. "Sorry, that slipped out, I didn't mean it to. We haven't even talked about it. And I don't want to."

Amber laughed. "Alex, stop being afraid of your feelings. We have talked about it. Even Tom knew how you felt. Why do you think he went home so soon? He had to bring your dad out here. I noticed, you didn't ask him when he is leaving Hawaii, or where he would evacuate to."

Alex shook his head. "I didn't even think to ask. I never ask. I wait for him to give directions, or tell me when he plans to do things."

Amber put her arms around his chest. "That won't work anymore. You aren't six now. Take us to camp, and then you start making more decisions on your own. I want to know what they are."

He chuckled and started the engine. Within a few minutes, they reached the other four-wheeler wedged between a few piles of lava.

Corbo came around the corner of a lava rock pile.

"Caught another rabbit." He held it up.

"With what?" Amber asked.

"Snare. Surprised they are out in the heat. Livia is waiting."

Alex was surprised too. The sound of the four-wheeler may have startled the rabbit into venturing out in the heat. His sweaty neck prickled.

He turned and followed Corbo into what looked like a rock wall. The vertical walls were thin, and so close that they had to hold their breath to squeeze in. Once inside, there wasn't much room. Enough for the four of them to sit.

"They sure knew what they were doing, didn't they?" Amber said.

Livia nodded.

Corbo skinned the rabbit and prepared it for the fire.

"Are you okay?" Amber asked.

"Tired. While we roast the rabbit, let's rest. It's been a long week." Livia leaned back against the wall, her phone in her lap.

Alex hoped she hadn't called her friends and told them where they were. He glanced at Corbo.

"Alex you rest. I'll watch the fire to be sure it doesn’t smoke too much," Amber said.

Alex glanced around the tiny space, and leaned his head on Amber's lap. "Sorry. Nowhere else to stretch out."

"That's okay." She patted his cheek. She poked the sticks in the

fire to keep it going.

"Most people will think the smoke is part of the fumaroles and volcano mouth behind us." Alex closed his eyes.

It would be a long night. He leaned back and drifted off into a nap.

Chapter 33

Jornada del Muerto Basin, New Mexico

Amber poked the fire. Sparks flared and flickered.

Livia leaned back against Corbo; resting her head in his lap.

Amber leaned against the wall, and watched the fire.

Hypnotic flames caused images to dance before her eyes. She wasn't sure if they were past events, future events, movies, or bits of news coverage. Flashes of roads buckled and split, cars trapped, pancaked between bridge layers. Buildings wavered like flowers in the breeze as people screamed from windows, jumped, and tumbled down. Oceans swelled, boiled, and raged across people and buildings, and washed them out to sea.

A flame jumped high.

Amber's head jerked up.

Livia tapped on her phone.

"What is it?"

Livia glanced up and sighed. "I have been trying not to chat with my friends too much. They think I'm not trying to stop you all. I don't know what to do. I do believe these events are punishment for the crazy choices our nation has made. Stopping you and Alex isn't going to stop the punishment. They think it will."

She closed her phone. "They claim we have too much information, and should live as people were meant to live. I'm not even sure anyone knows what that means these days."

"Sounds like something Windy would say."

Livia nodded. "I think she's right. She wants us to be careful. Someone needs to know what's going on underground."

Amber glanced back at the rabbit roasting. "It's almost done."

Livia stretched a little. "Good. The sooner we are back outside, the better."

"More tremors should be coming soon I guess. Will they ever end?" Amber sat up. Something shivered up her spine.

"There were several small ones while we waited on you. Not sure how much longer this cave will hold up." Livia stretched and sat up.

Amber remembered her vision and shuddered. She rubbed

Alex's head. "Time to wake up. We have to go outside and eat. Now."

Alex yawned and rubbed his eyes. He reached for a towel, grabbed the rabbit, and crawled out the opening.

Amber grabbed her backpack and followed.

Corbo and Livia joined them.

They sat in the shade of the hut and ate.

Amber's forehead prickled.

Silence echoed. No visible creatures, not even lizards sunning themselves as the sun set. With each turn of her head, stones appeared to move.

Heat shimmered on the dried lava around her. Off in the distance, the fumarole in the Jornada del Muerto steamed. Far less than the steam on the Magdalena Peak the day before.

All of the rabbit meat was gone, washed down with a little water.

Amber pulled out the snacks Windy had given her. Dried nuts and more beef jerky rolled in her pillowcase. As she handed out the treats, she glanced at the map on the pillowcase. Her finger drew the line of the "Ring of Fire." Next, she looked for the place they were at now, to draw a new invisible line though the region.

"Amber, are you worried?"

"Need to update my pillowcase. Look." She held the pillowcase up. "Some of the threads are pulling out. Guess they need repositioned as well."

Steam from the new Jornada del Muerto caldera distracted her as she smoothed the pillowcase on her lap. The steam suddenly doubled in size, and a rumbling echoed through the air and ground. Rocks and boulders bounced as the waves passed through the earth beneath their feet. She shoved the pillowcase in her pack; and crawled to the four-wheelers, afraid to try to stand.

The ground rumbled and groaned as Alex, Livia, and Corbo followed her example.

Part of the roof of the cave they had been in crashed to the ground. As it landed, the walls exploded outwards.

Amber covered her face, and turned to avoid flying debris.

Sharp pieces of dried lava hit her skin, and caused a few minor cuts.

The Jornada del Muerto's re-birth pains belched up a coating of ash that now showered them. The volcano itself was out of sight, though not far away in geological distance.

Alex coughed. "It's almost dark. We better drive on across while

we can."

Amber held her hand up. "Wait. Let me call Mom before we go."

She reached for her phone and hit the speed dial. She coughed. A busy signal. She closed the phone and shook her head. "Let's go."

Alex reached out his good hand to her.

She covered her mouth, and reached for him.

They climbed onto the four-wheelers and steadied themselves for the rough trek ahead.

Alex started the vehicle. "It could split. Better hold on tight!"

Amber hugged as close as she could, shoving Alex's pack to the side.

The up and down motion over the miniature valleys and hills from the ancient lava flows might make her seasick. They had to go on.

Rocks tumbled behind them, and ahead of them. The dried lava bed stretched and pulled. Cracks echoed, loud as a rifle shot, as the ground around them split and resettled.

Livia held on, pale as paper beside her.

Amber tried to smile at her.

Livia gazed off to the other side.

They reached the end of the dried lava flow. The ground here was rocky, and pushed up from the where the flow had ended so many centuries before.

If times had been normal, Amber would gladly have spent a few days here with Karen, her Mom, and Brandon. So much to explore, and learn. Now, it didn't seem to matter, as the landscape behind her changed before her eyes. Nothing learned today would be valid tomorrow.

The stability she had grown up with was gone. She had to be strong. She held Alex tighter.

Alex stopped behind a bush, giving them as much cover as he could.

There was the fence. The quakes had shifted the fence poles. Oryx, or deer, had knocked it onto the ground. Windy had the report. Someone would be sent to repair it in a day or two; if the events slowed down.

Alex checked the road, both ways.

Crossing the fence wouldn't be too rough, though anyone on the road could see them.

He stepped back behind their hiding place. "Well, this is it. The road. Once we cross it, we are on the base. Is everyone up to this?"

Corbo glanced back at Livia. "We don't have a choice. We have

to stay with you."

Alex sighed. "Do you trust us Corbo?"

Corbo looked down at the controls in his hands. "Not fully. I have to be sure you don't do anything to make it worse. Of course, now I have other things on my mind to."

"Corbo, we will find your dad; if he is alive. We have to make it through this first. Find out what is happening up there." Amber pointed to the mountain range on the horizon.

"I don't want to go," Livia said. "You can't leave me behind either."

"We wouldn't," Amber said. "Together, we find the answers and save the community."

Buzzing bees broke the tension.

Amber reached for her phone. "Dr. Rebecca, not mom. Hope everyone's okay."

She flipped the phone open. "Hello."

Noise echoed in the background behind Dr. Rebecca's voice. "Brandon was hurt in a cave-in. Maybe a broken leg, we don't know."

Someone shouted in the background.

"Your mom is trying to reach him, if the military will let her leave the base. They say they need her here to interpret data, not racing after Brandon. Be careful. Call when you are safe."

Something crashed behind Dr. Rebecca. A scream echoed through the phone.

The phone clicked to silence.

Amber shook her phone, and then dialed Dr. Rebecca's number. No answer. No answer at her mom's number either.

Amber looked up at the rest of the group. "Brandon's hurt. Mom wants to go to him. And they won't take her there."

Alex looked away. "It's a fast trip in, and out. By the time we return, there may be news. Everyone, turn off the phones. All of them. Anything that may distract us."

"Can't turn Windy off," Livia said.

"She'll be watching. With her help, we can do this. No idea how much time we have. Or, how dangerous this situation ahead of us will be. Let's go!" Alex turned off his phone as he climbed back onto the four-wheeler.

Amber grabbed hold of him. A tear slipped down her cheek. Karen thought everything here was going well. The worst news was that neither Amber, nor her mom, could be there with Brandon. No

time to call her, and no need to worry her. She hadn't answered her last few phone calls anyway.

Alex started the engine and drove straight to the road. The land all around was clear. Open, with no places to hide.

Amber wasn't so sure this trip was a good idea. She had always trusted those around her to make decisions. Then, she verified they were good decisions, or stayed away from that person. Her mom trusted Alex, so hopefully Alex knew what he was doing.

The military didn't know they were here. Once they entered the base, there'd be no turning back.

Chapter 34

White Sands Missile range to the San Andres Mountains, New Mexico

Amber took a deep breath as Alex crossed the road. Technically, they were breaking onto the base without anyone knowing they were there, other than Windy. They had to trust her. She had asked them to go.

Dusk deepened as they reached the first gentle valley.

Alex slowed, to let everyone catch their breath. He'd have to determine which mountain which would be the easiest, and quickest to scale.

Corbo pulled up beside Alex. "Is smoke a good thing to go towards, or away from, at this point?"

"Depends. Can you see some?"

"Sure. Up there, on that peak, the furthest away. Not much. Could be a campfire, or another fumarole."

"Do you think we are safer on the roads, or off them?"

Corbo surveyed the ground ahead of them. "If we stay on the roads, our fresh tracks will look like they belong. If we go off the beaten trails and roads, someone may become suspicious and follow."

"That may add miles to our trip. Amber, what do you think?"

Amber couldn't see the smoke, or steam, whichever it was. "You are the authority on volcanoes. I explore earthquake zones, preferably sleeping ones."

Alex laughed. "Nothing is sleeping here, nor has it for many days. Better be going."

"Go to the peak then. We have to know if the activity has spread this far east."

"It's about an hour away." Alex drove towards the peak. He frequently scanned the skies.

More steam or smoke might appear on either side. No birds were visible in the moonlight. Perhaps that was good thing. If Amber saw a bird outline, she'd worry whether it was a helicopter, or military plane searching for intruders.

A few minutes on the road, and Alex slowed down. Three roads

converged at this point.

Corbo pointed in one probable direction, so they turned that way, continuing east. They had to reach beyond where people were expected to be, before they could turn north to the mountains.

Silence wasn't so golden here. Every rock seemed to be listening for breathing that didn't belong.

Alex paused at a wider road than the one they were on. He glanced both ways, and crossed it.

Shadows wavered in the broken moonlight. A pile of rocks appeared far off, though actual distance was deceptive here. Those rocks could be hiding anything. If cameras, or other monitoring equipment, were hid in the rocks, they would be detected.

Alex and Corbo approached slowly. Alex's muscles tensed and twitched. He wasn't used to this outdoor life any more than Amber was.

No matter how long they had stayed on a site, there had been a trailer with running water to stay in at night, or after a day or two. It had been days since their last shower. Animals would be attracted by their body odor.

Alex took a deep breath, and Amber gasped.

An oryx jumped out from behind the rocks. The antelope ate the scrub brush down, the better to locate intruders by. The animals leapt away from unexpected people.

Alex drove around the oryx.

Two more hid on the other side of the rock.

No sign of any people. They were in luck, so far.

This road, little more than a trail, dipped to the south, and rose to the north within minutes. Every so often, smaller trails; made by vehicles not much different from theirs, branched one way, or another, sometimes nearly parallel for quite a distance.

The route turned north. Peaks steamed ahead. Distance was deceptive here. Miles away, the steam billowed, and the wind blew it around, in eerie shapes and formations in the moonlit darkened sky.

It reminded Amber of a Halloween postcard. If only this were a scary movie and not reality. She'd wake up in the morning with Karen, and they'd find that her mom and Brandon were fixing breakfast in the kitchen with the early morning sun shining in. Amber blinked.

A more used road branched off, and rock formations appeared in the distance. They looked alien, and out of place to Amber. She squeezed her legs around Alex's middle.

He slowed to give her a chance to survey the landscape.

There in front of them was the largest crater she had ever seen. The moonlight showered the crater with light. It gleamed and glistened, lighting the area. Headlights wouldn't be needed, even on a less than full moon night. She shivered in fear of what caused it, as well as what dangers lurked deep within.

Craters on the base were most often of bomb origin. The route Windy had penciled in would take them near two atomic test craters. She shivered at the thought. Radiation at dangerous levels should be long gone, or Windy would have warned them, wouldn't she?

They passed it slowly, and reached a crossroads.

Alex turned right, and followed a good road.

Soon, they reached a pile of brush before a major road.

He paused, and looked both ways, crossed it, and followed a smaller trail to the right, back south. Within minutes, Alex paused at the brim of another impact crater.

A future crater-lake region, if water ever flowed here again, as it once had. Amber held on tight. When water penetrated these craters, would they stir up buried radiation? That was a question to ask Dr. Evan. Her mom or Brandon might not know the answer.

Alex followed the trails north, passing many side trails. They were on a main road, so they were cautious. He turned closer to the smoke in the distance.

So far, they had seen no living creatures besides themselves, and the oryx. No other sounds louder over their engines, not even a rattlesnake. No wolves howled in the distance. Everything appeared unreal, almost as if they had landed on Mars. They passed another large impact crater, without stopping to glance at the fenced in area.

Amber held on. Vibrations from the four-wheelers made it difficult to determine if the ground was still, or quakes were happening. Her head spun and ached from the jerky movement, even stranger than riding a horse.

Alex rounded curves and turned, following the road warily. He stopped.

One road went perpendicular from the direction they were pointed. Nothing appeared to be on it. A few bushes grew beyond the road. There was a second parallel track. This was an excellent place for an ambush of unsuspecting people.

Something rattled, perhaps a snake, perhaps not.

Nothing was visible in the darkness. That didn't mean no one was there.

Alex pushed the gas pedal to race away from potential danger. The parallel roads were soon far behind them. The trail ended abruptly; sending the four-wheeler into a skid.

Corbo pulled up beside him, trying to stay in the tracks.

"We need to turn east anyway. The cloud is over there, almost hid by the hills now."

Alex nodded. "We have to meet up with another trail." He turned around, and followed the trail back a short distance to another road, and a seldom used path next to it.

Hopefully their tire marks wouldn't appear fresh.

He drove across the rough path to the road. Reaching it, he watched for any signs of movement. Alex's muscles tensed under her hands.

They didn't know if the cloud was campfire smoke, or volcanic steam. While there was an area at the White Sands National Monument where camping was allowed, the vapor rising from the mountains was too far to the north to be in the designated areas. Unless a group of soldiers camped out on the mountain watching for signs of trouble.

Within moments, they reached the end of the road below where the cloud billowed up from the mountain. Alex reached to turn off the four-wheeler, and left it running. "We don't want the noise of turning them back on. Livia stay here and watch the vehicles. You have your crutches?"

Livia nodded and scooted back enough for Corbo to step down.

Amber almost groaned when she tried to step down. Her thighs would never feel the same. She was afraid she would walk bow legged for the rest of her life after this trip. Waddling after Alex and Corbo, who weren't doing much better, the land formations shifted from desert to volcanic.

The mountain trail zigzagged through ragged clumps of ancient lava. Brush, grass, and small trees hung on, with roots twisted above the ground, as well as below. No tiny feet scurried through the desert night. Scorpions and spiders should be out searching for desert nightlife snacks.

Bits of scrap material fluttered from branches. Someone had been here recently, and left in a hurry.

Amber stayed directly behind Alex, watching the ground to avoid stumbling in the shaded areas.

Alex stopped and held his hand up.

Amber stepped around him.

An open seething pit of liquid, like something one would expect to see in Yellowstone National Park yawned around the bend. Steam billowed, and showed no sign of stopping.

Corbo made a slight sound, and pointed.

The clouds parted. Star light peeked through. The mountain range steamed, an unwatched pot, ready to boil over.

Amber gasped and grabbed Alex's hand.

His body shivered. "Let's go."

They hurried back to the vehicles.

"Back the way we came if you can remember it," Corbo said.

"Wait," Livia said. "Refill the tanks before we start."

Alex nodded, and unhooked his spare tank.

"Thanks." Corbo smiled at Livia and filled their tank.

Amber waited on Alex to finish refueling before climbing on.

Alex turned them around, and hurried back as fast as he dared.

The four-wheelers could reach seventy miles an hour. If the track was visible far enough ahead, that would be wonderful. As it was, he had to steer by starlight, and remember a rough road he didn't know well, with hidden bumps and ruts. Tortoises or armadillos might be on the paths. Hit one of them, and they would fly through the air. Speed wouldn't be safe, if they wanted to reach the Immi Clinic in a hurry. Amber hoped he drove safely as well as quickly as they raced between the steaming range, and back toward the now flowing Jornada del Muerto caldera.

The parallel roads veered into view in front of them.

A small light twinkled in the distance. Was someone alerted? Amber hoped no one had followed them. They were riding out the way they had come in. If a soldier had been hidden in the brush, he could have radioed for backup.

Wolves howled in the distance. At least, she hoped they were wolves, and not guard dogs. Shivers raced up her spine. Trying to find answers to the geological questions, and out run potential natural disasters was not how she planned to spend the final weeks of her senior year.

It was supposed to be peaceful. Then off to work with Mom, Brandon, and Karen at her side. Karen's boyfriend, Jerry, had promised to find her a date for prom. A tear slipped down her cheek, and she didn't dare let go of Alex to brush it away. Prom may have even already happened. Time flowed in an unexpected pattern. The life she had known seemed gone forever.

At the smaller crater, Alex paused, and Amber glanced around

him.

She didn't think that rock had been in the road as they passed through, twenty minutes ago.

Alex didn't look back. He sped up.

Amber held on. She glanced back to be sure Corbo and Livia were behind them.

Corbo's face was almost as pale as Livia's.

Beside the larger crater, Alex slammed the brakes. The oryx herd had found them. Of maybe a different one. This time there were about twenty. He crept around them, and back on the path. They reached the last major road. Alex paused.

Something moved down the road, towards the main base.

Amber couldn't determine what it was, or how far away. Her heart beat fast as she clung to Alex.

More trails, more turns, and more rocks to pass. They reached the fence, and scaled across it. At last, they reached the relative safety of the edge of the lava flow. Amber could breathe as Alex slowed.

"Anyone need a quick break?" No one answered, so he continued on across the lava field. It was a long way back to the Immi Clinic where Windy waited on their report. Once they made it there, Amber could breathe again, until she called her mom.

Chapter 35

Jornada del Muerto to Immi Clinic to Rio Grande, New Mexico

Within seconds, they crossed into the first series of ruts. The remains of the lava hut teetered in the moonlight. Would anyone try to rebuild it in the future? Right in the center, it would be an excellent research center for the volcanoes, if they were predictable, like the ones in Hawaii.

The last few hours for Alex had been a nightmare. He now regretted his wish to see a live volcano in action. New Mexico bubbled with far too many, and these weren't the relatively predictable volcanoes he knew in Hawaii. Whether the shaking was volcanic, quake activity, or a combination, he didn't know any more than anyone else did. It was scary to be so close to a volcano when it might decide to erupt; or the ground chose to shift under their feet. The road might split, with a lava pit unexpectedly yawning at their feet.

He hoped Amber was taking this trip well. She had been unusually quiet, even for her, during the trip back. Of course, her riding behind him hardly made conversation possible.

The path across the Jornada Del Muerto plain was riddled with cracks and crevices. Even if they were near one of the few roads that crossed it, those would likely be damaged as well.

Alex drove cautiously though the ruts. A popped tire, with volcanoes steaming on both sides would leave little hope for escape. He paused to watch the steam from the new Jornada del Muerto caldera circle upwards into toward the moon. A bird flew fast up high. If only he could grow wings and fly himself and Amber to someplace safe. A call back to General Nord, with all the data his dad and Dr. Rebecca had collected would surely be enough evidence to evacuate the state. Though where to, remained a mystery.

Amber squeezed his thighs, which sent chills up and down his spine.

Alex continued on. Dreams of flight to safety kept him alert as much as the jolts kept him awake.

At last, the outline of the horse pen and building where Windy and Champ, would be waiting appeared. The building was all lit up, as busy at night, as during the day. Injuries and illness know no "proper" time. He drove around the corner.

A small group of people waited.

Windy walked up to him.

"Hi Alex, how was your trip?"

"Hi Windy. Thanks for the four-wheelers. We saw what we needed to see. I don't think anyone, other than the onyx knew we were there." Alex turned it off and handed her the key and helmet.

Windy smiled.

"It isn't good. The Jornada del Muerto caldera has reformed and is dispensing lava. At this pace, it may take days, or weeks to close the tunnel, unless, a quake shakes the sides down first."

Amber stepped off and stood beside him.

Alex patted the handlebars. "The whole hillside and mountain range of The San Andres fault system appears to be a series of steaming, loosely connected open lava pits. We looked in one, and that was enough to make us run."

Windy nodded. "Better alive to report your findings. It is enough." She glanced at the corrals.

"Take your horses back. I have prepared more packs for you. Where do you go from here?"

Two men near her leaped over the corral fence.

"I don't know. No one has ever seen anything like this. What do you think?" Alex watched the men call the horses to them gently. So different than those men in the other corral. That night seemed so long ago. Less than two nights ago. Those horses had served them well.

Windy turned from the fence, and peered through the darkness toward the forming volcanoes. "We want our lands back to try to heal them, or live with them the way they are now. Take your young friend, and go somewhere safe. Far away from here, if you want to live. It isn't safe when the Earth vomits, twists, and turns, as she lays down new skin."

Amber's hand held his. She blushed in the florescent lights, or maybe it was sunburn from the day on the lava flows.

Windy's friends came up with their horses, and fresh packs of food. Corbo handed the keys over to Windy, nodded, and turned to help Livia onto her horses.

Amber used the four-wheeler as step to Fortune's back. The

corral lights flickered.

In the distance, the Jornada del Muerto basin shimmered. Whites, greens, and even yellows danced across the ground; much as he imagined the Northern Lights danced across the skies.

The ground rumbled.

Frozen, Alex couldn't move.

"Go, now!" Windy screamed.

The horses neighed and tried to escape.

Alex jumped on, and galloped after Fortune, hoping Corbo and Livia were close behind.

The rumbling followed them as they raced across the landscape, toward the river. The ground twisted, turned, and buckled.

Alex held on tight as his horse followed Fortune. If the horse's leg hit a hole in the eerie, shimmering semi darkness, Alex would fly across his head. He gulped.

The ground ahead of them shifted again.

His horse panted and groaned.

The river couldn't be far.

Amber screamed, and Fortune stopped, panting.

Alex pulled up beside her.

Feet away, the ground opened in an enormous gulf. Not having seen the river here before, he was unsure of its previous width. From the look on Amber's face, she wasn't expecting this. The other two horses pounded up behind them.

Corbo whistled at the noisy swirling waters below.

"Where to now?"

Livia slumped on her horse. "Some rest soon. I am exhausted, and this event is going to traumatize the whole countryside."

Amber walked her horse south. She stopped.

Behind them, the lava fields no longer shimmered. In the limited starlight, her face was paler than Livia's.

Amber walked her horse back to the group. She looked past Alex to Livia. "Livia, I'm sorry. Can you take any pain medication?"

Livia shook her head.

"What we have is a line of forming volcanoes, as well as an erupting volcano to the east." Alex's arm waved to the red sky, dust and shadows enveloped the land they had crossed.

Alex's horse stomped and tried to take the lead. "And an angry blocked river to the west. We aren't safe here. If we go south and this natural dam breaks, we would die in the floods. East, the volcano's lava, or dust, may cover us. The wind is blowing the ash

further east at the moment. This plateau has been flooded before when the Jornada del Muerto erupted."

The river lapped below their feet as it swirled and raged trying to spread past the blockade downstream.

Amber sighed. "I hope the Immi Clinic can be evacuated in time, they may be underwater soon. We have to go north. We should have been able to cross here. No way now." She turned her horse north and trotted off, not bothering to check if anyone followed.

Livia sat up as straight as she could, and followed Amber, setting her jaw to the pain and exhaustion.

Alex raced to catch up with Amber, giving his horse full rein. He yelled to her, "Where to?"

"The river below San Antonio is blocked. We will never make it in time. We have to run a few more minutes before we both report in."

She raced ahead of him.

It was all he could do to almost keep up as she dodged bushes, trees, and shrubs, as well as animals trying to escape the lava flows in the east. The animals, like themselves, were trapped between the lava and the raging river.

Ahead was a small pile of rocks.

A young male held his hand up.

Alex and Amber slowed, and waited for Corbo and Livia to catch up.

"Windy's friend?" Alex asked.

The young man barely inclined his chin.

Amber slid off her horse.

Alex slid off, careful of his broken left arm.

The river swirled and roared behind them.

Amber pulled her phone out.

Alex pulled out his phone to report in to his dad.

The phone rang. His dad should be in bed. They had ridden most of the night, or maybe he was counting the hours wrong.

"Hello?"

"Hey Dad. No idea what time it is there. We have trouble here."

"I know son. I am going to try to leave. Tomorrow, I promised Tom, and his mom, we'd go to Colorado and help monitor from there. No idea what we can do."

"Dad, the last blast, it dammed the Rio Grande. That hasn't happened for millions of years." Alex gulped. This would be the tough part.

"We are trapped between the lava flows and the river. No way

out, that we can see. Trying to go north. With all the quakes, and damage there already, not sure where we can go."

Silence on the other end.

"Dad, you there?"

"Yes son. I'm worried about you. Please be careful. You are my hope. My future, no matter what happens. I have to go, and try to prepare. We leave in a few hours." A checked sob choked across the miles.

The phone clicked off. Alex hoped Tom's mom was there to comfort him.

Alex turned to Amber.

Her face, whiter than snow, looked up to him. "Alex, they think she's dead. A building fell on where they think she was. And Brandon, no one knows. Dr. Rebecca is scared. The last one, the reports are ugly."

Alex pulled her close. "We'll survive, some way."

Amber nodded. "There's no escape. Lava, river, quake damage, that last tremor was likely an 8.5. No telling how badly it destroyed whatever was left of the towns north of here. They were already on the edge. Frail buildings from previous damage likely crumbled onto anyone sleeping in them." She leaned against his shoulder and let the tears out.

Livia reached over to her as well.

As Alex held her, he remembered the young man they had stopped for.

The man leaned against the rocks.

"Can Windy help? She's done so much already."

The young man nodded, as if he could not speak. He pointed to an open area a few yards away.

"Do we need to wait there?" Amber asked.

The man shook his head and pointed to the sky.

"Help is coming? A helicopter?"

The man nodded.

Anywhere else would be wonderful. Alex would never wish to see a live volcano again. Amber might lose Fortune, and that would break her heart. Four horses could not fit in a helicopter.

A faint rumbling other than the river, began in the distance. It grew louder, as the helicopter flew into sight and closer to where they stood. The young man reached out, and took the reins of all of the horses.

A large helicopter landed. As it hit the ground, the door opened

and they ran for it. The blades never turned off. The noise, though deafening, was lower than the increasing roar of the trapped river. Soon, that river would break its bounds.

Alex helped Amber in, and turned to help Livia. As soon as they settled in their seats, Amber waved to her horse. Alex hoped he could make that loss up to her someday. Her mother, Brandon, and her horse were too much to lose in twelve hours.

The crew on the helicopter didn't even try to speak to them over the rapid pattering of the blades. They took off northwards across the swollen river.

Alex put his good arm around Amber. She leaned against him, looking down, resting her head close to his chest.

Corbo and Livia leaned against each other.

One of the crew placed a backpack under her injured leg and covered her with a blanket.

Alex was ready for some quiet, and a good night's sleep would do them all a world of good. He couldn't remember now when his last good sleep was. Maybe back at the trailer, that one night. Or, did they have two nights there? He had forgotten. It was difficult to keep awake, so he squeezed Amber's shoulder. She glanced up and smiled. It would be awhile before they could rest, and talk in private.

The helicopter started downward, landed, and a few more people climbed on board. The helicopter rose, and continued on its way.

Alex moved his legs, trying not to disturb Amber. They could be going anywhere, and anything could happen. For the moment, they were safe from Mother Nature's fury.

Chapter 36

In the air from the Rio Grande back to Los Alamos, New Mexico

Amber leaned her head against Alex's shoulder and drifted off to sleep under the monotony of the whirring blades. Alex held her close, the only sense of normalcy left. So many people missing, and the world breaking apart at her feet. She'd find a way to build a new life, with or without Karen, Brandon, or her mom. A sob snuck out under the sound of the blades. She'd rather have her mom beside her. There was so much she needed to know about life that her mom had never had time to teach her.

The tone of the blades changed.

Amber sat up and looked out the window.

The helicopter landed. This time the blades slowed until they moved about the speed of a ceiling fan on medium. The crew waved them all off.

Alex and Corbo helped Livia to stand. As soon as they were on the ground, he stepped down, to help Amber.

Amber grabbed her pack and Livia's. She stepped out of the helicopter into Alex's arms.

The other people they had picked up followed her out of the helicopter.

One of the crew pointed towards a military jeep driving their direction.

Alex sighed and started that way, his arm around Amber's shoulder.

The men and women behind them wrapped themselves in blankets and staggered sleepily toward the jeep.

"Welcome to Los Alamos." General Nord stopped beside them. "Please, join us." He waved to the door.

Amber shook as Alex held her arm. What would the General say to them? She needed to find out if her mom had survived the falling buildings.

The jeep stopped outside a long, low building.

Alex held Amber's hand as they followed General Nord into a small room.

"I am sure you are all tired. Restrooms are around the corner to the right. Coffee is available across the hall, and food will be brought soon."

General Nord then turned to the other passengers. "I am sure you want to know your town, and its citizens are safe. You stayed until they evacuated?"

One man nodded.

"Of course, some will hide and refuse to listen to the sirens. More town leaders will be coming soon, and we will meet in a larger room. Meanwhile rest here until they arrive, and let the helicopter's buzz leave your ears." General Nord turned and walked out of the room.

One woman turned on the light. "This room isn't too bad. At least they left us pillows and blankets."

Amber and her friends left the room for a few minutes.

When they returned, the other group were talking at the table, some wrapped in blankets.

One woman came over and helped Livia settle on a couch in the back of the room. She wrapped a blanket around her leg, and put a pillow under her head. "Why are you all included? I thought this was for town leaders?"

"What town are you from?" Alex asked.

She smiled at him. "San Antonio. It was practically destroyed. And they forced an evacuation of all living residents. They didn't tell us much."

Alex nodded. "We drove through there a few days ago, and it was bad then."

Amber snuggled under a blanket. "It's worse now. Plus, the river is dammed."

The woman's eyes opened wide. "It is? No surprise they evacuated then. With the canals, and floodplains everywhere, there is no telling what may happen. Do you all need anything?"

"Rest. We haven't slept in a few days," Alex said.

"Settle into a chair and nap. We can turn out the overhead light and talk by the light through the door."

Amber plugged her phone into an outlet so it would be charged to call Karen when they woke up. A quick check of email showed no recent messages. Karen should have responded with something by now.

Alex added his phone to the surge protector. "Good idea."

"A message from Josie," Livia said. "She wants to know where we are, and talk to me."

Amber glanced at her.

Livia looked up and handed the phone to Corbo. "I'm not replying."

Amber already half asleep sat down beside Livia. All of her energy had been used up. When she woke, she'd try to find Dr. Rebecca, and her mom if possible. For now, she leaned against Alex as her eyes shut of their own accord.

The woman laid an extra blanket across them and tucked it in.

Amber tried to say, "Thank you," in an incomprehensible mumble.

The lights dimmed.

Her eyes relaxed.

What seemed like moments later, General Nord appeared. "Alex, Amber, friends, wake up. Sorry to wake you so soon. You will be needed in the meeting hall in ten minutes. Meet at the coffee pot in five minutes and someone will lead you." With that, he turned and stalked off.

Amber stretched.

Alex folded the blankets. "At least we had a three-hour nap. Hope I am alert enough to think, and remember everything that's happened."

Amber nodded and shook her arms to rid them of the pins and needles feeling.

A few minutes later, they met at the coffee pot, ready for the meeting.

Dr. Rebecca walked around the corner.

Amber ran into her arms.

Dr. Rebecca patted her back, and said a few soft, soothing words. She turned and led them to the conference room.

Alex took Amber's hand, and wiped away the tears. He held the door open for her.

Above the projector screen was a wall painting of Hiroshima, with the words "Results of The Manhattan Project" in a red semi-circle. Even though the artist's depiction looked small from this distance, she remembered pictures and video of the destruction she had seen in school. A nation's calamity, turned worldwide, as the after affects entered the ecosystems for years; perhaps continuing to impact some regions today.

Dr. Rebecca led them to the front of the room.

Corbo and Livia sat near the door. Her crutches leaned against the wall.

Dr. Evan was there, across from them. His grim smile brought tears to Amber's eyes, as she asked for news of Brandon without words. He looked down at the papers in front of him.

Alex grasped her hand under the table.

She stared straight ahead, willing the tears back. Other professionals wouldn't take her seriously if she cried. They didn't know why she needed to cry.

General Nord entered and walked to the front of the room.

"Okay, no real time for introductions. You each know why you're here. We have our volcano and earthquake specialists here." He waved toward Alex, Amber, and Dr. Rebecca.

"We have mining experts, and their helpers." He waved to Dr. Evan, Mr. Spike, and a few men beside him.

"We have, people from the Army Corps of Engineers, one representative each from Cochiti, Abiquiu, Jemez Canyon Dams, and the Elephant Butte Dam."

"Last, we have representatives from each of the major towns and villages from Albuquerque south to Truth or Consequences. Any other people, sorry to not mention you, I am sure you are important, if you are here. Dr. Rebecca, can you please tell us why we are all here, from your point of view."

Dr. Rebecca walked up to the screen. It clicked on, and the first picture appeared.

Amber groaned. There was the swirling Rio Grande, almost as they had seen it late last night; or early this morning. It looked worse from this point of view. Her sweaty hands clutched the table.

"As you can see, this is not the way this river section should look," said Dr. Rebecca. "According to satellite pictures, and the reports of our field specialists," she turned to look at Amber and Alex. "Mother Nature has dammed the Rio Grande."

She waited on the pictures to change. "Here is what we see, a dry river bed with ancient lava rocks above them. Looks okay, to the unknowing eye. However, our representatives from the Elephant Butte Power Plant are here to explain why it isn't."

The picture changed to a sunny picture of the power plant, working at full capacity.

A man walked forward. "Thank you, Dr. Rebecca. This picture was taken in better days, maybe a month ago. As of the last major event, there is no water flow to the lake a few miles above the dam. Our dam provides power, and water, for many residents. With no water to control, there is no power. Food cannot be grown locally

without our help. However, this is only the beginning. Our environmentalist is concerned about the long term effects."

Amber groaned. The aftereffects could cause worse problems than that of any recorded earthquake in history. And it kept going. When would Mother Nature's restless legs go back to sleep? How many people would die before the authorities acted to save lives?

A new picture popped up on the screen. The full extent of the damage was an artist's rendition of what Amber had seen and reported. A large lava boulder, the size of a house, had fallen across the riverbed, damming it. Clearer detail would be obtained from an updated satellite picture. None had passed across the dammed area since daylight.

A woman Amber didn't know addressed the crowd. "If the water stays behind this natural dam, it will cause serious problems. In a few days, the water will back up, inundating many of the small towns along the river. It will spill out across the open plains, onto the Jornada del Muerto basin. Eventually, it will spill onto the missile ranges, possible inundating underground storage areas. I cannot say what is there, or not." She sat back down.

General Nord said, "Alex, Amber, we know you were there, on the basin. What did you see?"

Chapter 37

Los Alamos, New Mexico

Alex gulped. How much did they know? He held Amber's hand. "Sir, the volcanoes are active. Lava is flowing."

The pictures on the screen changed, showing the eerie colors of the Jornada del Muerto plain as it had appeared a few hours before. "Sir, those are not the only ones. We saw more, far worse to come."

He fell back into his seat.

People stared at him.

General Nord nodded.

Satellite pictures of the San Andres fault line appeared, with drawn in steam rising from the artist rendered volcanic vents and fumaroles.

Amber pointed with her free hand. "Sir, they are open. The lava fields have spread."

General Nord glanced at her, then back at the room. "You all know our danger. If we do nothing, towns, and military bases will be inundated with water and lava."

He turned to Dr. Rebecca. "What are the chances the dam will break on its own?"

She pulled the picture of the boulder dam up, and enlarged it. "We need an accurate picture, and someone to go there, and face the swirling waters to check it out. It will become stronger the longer the sand particles stay wet. The blockage might remain for days, years, or decades, perhaps a thousand years. It depends on weathering, storms, many things. Some we can control. Others not so much."

General Nord glanced to the environmentalist. "How long until the water reaches the volcano vents?"

Alex wished his dad were here to answer their questions. At least General Nord had moved on to ask questions of others. His hands shook as he thought about how the water rushing over the lava would be different than lava erupting in water. It probably wouldn't turn the flows into pillow lava until they were well inundated.

The environmentalist shuffled her notes. "Depends on the rains; both here, and up north. We may have days, maybe weeks. For the

missile ranges, weeks to months, depending on which valleys the water finds open to snake through. And, if the fissures open enough to let the river leak down into the underground water table, steam could erupt, blasting the fumaroles into wide open sores on the land."

Dr. Evan interrupted the gasps in the room. "As the water reaches the open volcanic areas, the steam will change the climate, leading to more rain. The lava fields have shifted, and so have the water tables. We don't have up to date data. It is changing by the hour right now, sometimes by the minute. Where water was yesterday, magma might be today."

There wasn't time to study and learn. There might not even be time to help others escape. If only Amber had gone somewhere safe. Then, he'd be alone here, and Alex didn't want that either.

General Nord held up his hand to quell the chatter. "Leaders, you can see why your towns have been evacuated. Something must be done. We must fight water with water this time. It won't put the fires out, or stop the earthquakes."

He looked at every person in the room. "It may slow down further destruction. We will save what we can." His shoulders lowered, not quite a slump.

The mayor of San Antonio, who had spoken to Alex earlier, raised her hand.

General Nord nodded to her.

"What do you intend to do?" The woman wrung her hands.

"Our engineers have contingency plans on record in this event," he said. "Never intended for this magnitude of calamity, however. Major Gran of the Army Corps of Engineers will you please explain."

Major Gran stood up. "We apologize for the disturbance to your towns. In order to break the barrier, we have blocked the Rio Grande water from entering the canals for the last four hours. In another three hours, all data will be accessed again."

Dr. Rebecca switched the projector to a map of the New Mexico river system.

Major Gran walked up to the wall map and pointed at each dam as he called its name. "If the barrier holds, there will be a timed release of water from the Abiquiu, Jemez Canyon, Cochiti, and Elvado Dams, as well as a few smaller ones set to come together as a giant wave to wash away the blockade a few miles north of the Elephant Butte Lake."

Silence filled the room. There was no way a wave that large

could pass through without devastating the riverbank communities. Bridges would collapse. Riverbanks would break down, some several feet. The entire course of the river could be altered, forever. New channels would open, and others be blocked by debris. If the residents had fled as instructed, they would be safe, while their homes and businesses potentially destroyed. Loss of life to animals, some endangered and only living in this fragile environment, would be incalculable. Mother Nature could give them no warning.

An uproar began as people asked questions and demanded answers.

"My town," the mayor of San Antonio said. "It's all I've ever known." She slumped in her chair.

"Will the tent cities become new towns?" One leader asked.

"I hope people didn't leave their pets behind," Another said.

Alex slipped to the back of the room to check on Corbo and Livia.

Questions floated around the room.

"Wouldn't the river seep right through to the water table?"

"How long will it take the dam to break?"

"How long until we, and our towns, can go back home?"

Corbo and Livia shifted uneasily in their chairs. It was too loud to talk.

The uproar settled as people sat back down, waiting on General Nord to respond to the questions.

General Nord waved to the woman beside him, and stepped back.

"Hi. I run the Environmental work here at Los Alamos." Her hands shook as she tried to hold onto the projector controls. She placed her hands on the table, and leaned forward.

"I am used to addressing a few people. Sorry. Basically, this event goes beyond anything we have, or could prepare for. This isn't a one-hundred-year event. It's a one-million-year event."

Alex walked back to his seat. They were taking Amber and his research seriously. That was good. Dr. Rebecca must have convinced the team here, somehow.

The environmentalist turned to the screen and pointed. Pictures of the area, as artists rendered them, from the last group of eruptions and blockage were there now. "It won't be easy to break down. Nature wears it away in time. Nature's timescale may be too long."

General Nord stepped up. "We don't have the time, equipment,

or man power to move everything out of the danger zones. We cannot allow either water, or magma, to reach our equipment on base."

She nodded. "We have an idea how long it will take for the canal water to build up. If that doesn't break the boulder out of place, we must try something else. Could take a day or two. Much damage will be done, whether we do anything or not."

"Break the blockade while you have the river closed further upstream," someone shouted.

The woman pointed to a picture. "Creating a temporary block further upstream, and using heavy equipment to break that lava boulder, would be exceptionally dangerous. It may not work either. The ground all around is wet and saturated. Equipment would sink into the mud."

Alex closed his eyes. If the equipment stuck in the mud, and people tried to work on it, a quake could break the temporary dams upstream, washing away the workers. By the time anyone knew something was wrong, it would be too late to give warning.

General Nord shifted on his ankles. "We also have people evaluating the risks on each base. People working around the clock to determine where the magma is, and where we can move supplies to. Right now, a place that was safe yesterday is no longer safe today. We may be looking at a further withdrawal."

The environmentalist used the pointer on the wall map. "Here, we hope to push the water forward. We must break the blockade before it hits magma chambers to the east. We don't have much time."

"Volcanoes seem to be opening up everywhere." She turned to face the crowd. "We thought we were relatively safe here. Even with hot springs locally, the magma had been deep within the earth."

Dr. Rebecca placed the current eruptions picture on the screen.

General Nord pointed to several places on the map. "Please inform your citizens we will let them know when it is safe to return to their homes and businesses. However, for now, please stay away from all closed areas. We do not have enough manpower for both evacuation, and rescue efforts. Other states may be mobilized; if, when, and how, the president deems necessary."

General Nord scanned the room. "Alex, Amber, I will meet with you and Dr. Rebecca in an hour. Town leaders, you are dismissed for the moment, to inform your citizens. I must meet with the Army Corps of Engineers and mining officials now, in the next room." He

turned and walked through a door.

As the city leaders walked out the door, they loudly discussed what they should say; and how much information to reveal. Too much, and people might rush home to save belongings, and risk being caught in the flood. Looting would become a real problem. Too little, and people would think it was safe to return home to stay.

As the last few people turned the corner in the hall, silence descended on the room, broken by the hum of the projector screen.

Dr. Rebecca sat at her computer; flicking through the most recent pictures.

"Why don't they use a nuclear explosion to break the dam?" Corbo said.

"A nuclear explosion would set off more earthquakes and volcanoes. Not to mention making the state unlivable for generations to come." Amber said.

"They should fuse the plates, shouldn't they?" Corbo turned to Dr. Rebecca.

She shook her. "They may fuse one pair of plates, temporarily. Then, like hairline fractures in glass, they could cause more fractures to radiate out from the original plate. It's a risk too great to take here."

"No one realized this area would become seismically active again, when they built the nuclear testing grounds here." The environmentalist who worked at Los Alamos stood beside him and said. "No one understood the dangers. The weapons and stocked supplies are too dangerous to move. It takes a lot of time and expertise to do so safely. If a truck carrying one overturned during a quake, we'd all suffer from radiation exposure, if we survived."

"I wish people would leave well enough alone," Livia said. "We don't need weapons of mass destruction."

"Would you give up medicine to fix your ankle? Would you give up cars and air conditioning in the scorching New Mexico summer?" The environmentalist said.

The door squeaked open and General Nord stepped in.

Livia shook her head. "I guess not. I want the good, though not the bad of modern life. We've lived with it for so long, all of our lives. I don't know if we could live without the technology we've come to depend on."

"You've done pretty well the last few days," General Nord said. "Sorry, couldn't help overhearing. Look, we know where you have been, and why. Windy set it up her way. Please don't take off again

without letting us know where you are going."

He rocked back and forth on his feet. "Okay, tell me what all you did see, that the satellite doesn't show."

"You aren't angry with us?" Amber twiddled her hair.

"Did you see anything you shouldn't have?"

"I wouldn't know if I did. What weren't we supposed to see?" Amber said.

General Nord smiled. "Alex, what did you see?"

Alex described the scenes, both the Jornada del Muerto basin volcano, and the open calderas he had seen in the hills.

"Did you stop at the new caldera in the basin on your way back?"

"No way, sir. We were too scared. Glad we didn't. We would have been there when the quake occurred."

He looked up at General Nord. "The one person we met after seeing the dammed Rio Grande said Windy sent the helicopter."

"She did. Windy sometimes helps us, by watching for anomalies. Science is a specialty of hers. She is good at picking and training young soldiers, as well as horses."

Alex blushed. Not something he wanted to do.

"I set out to prove Dr. Rebecca wrong, I had to. My livelihood depended on it." General Nord stared at the table for a long minute.

"I couldn't prove her wrong. Alex, I am sending you and Amber away. I tried to keep Amber's mom safe, and now, we don't know if she is alive or dead."

"Sir, don't send us away, we need to be here," Alex said.

General Nord faced him. "Young man, don't argue with me. I have lived my life. If I die in this event, I die. You are a young adult, with many years ahead of you, if you survive. The future will need young men like you and Corbo. Bright, intelligent, and those who know where the secrets are. You may have to find them. I am sending you to the Colorado team. Satellite communications will allow you to continue your work with Dr. Rebecca."

Tears welled up in his eyes. Dad would soon be there, if not already.

Amber stepped in front of him. "Sir, please. We are needed here. Livia and Corbo are part of our team now. We need them. They need us. Mom would have wanted us to stay."

General Nord sighed.

"Besides," Amber said, "If what I think is going to occur happens, nowhere in North America is any safer than anywhere else. Colorado might be right in the thick of it, thanks to Yellowstone."

The General covered his eyes. "Alright spunky young lady. You are like your mom. If I let you stay, promise me you will be careful. And do what is asked to save your lives."

Amber nodded, and so did Alex.

He wanted to see his Dad again. If Amber could have her mom by her side. Someday though, she would meet him, if the quakes and volcanoes settled into their new locations.

Chapter 38

Los Alamos, New Mexico

Brandon missing, and mom likely dead left Amber numb. Her arms and legs tightened, their muscles not coordinated due to lack of sleep, and little food.

General Nord had threatened to force them to leave and go to a "safe" place. For now, he sent them to a room to sleep for a few more hours. Then he would brief them on what was expected of them.

She wouldn't leave Livia and Corbo behind. Livia needed to find hope within herself. Corbo needed to find his father, and his own future.

Karen should have been here to help her. She would have helped Livia and Corbo already, of that Amber was sure. Amber checked her phone. No message. What could be taking Karen so long? The clock said 9:00 am. Karen would be in school and couldn't answer the phone now.

Adrift in a world she had never thought would really happen, at least not to her. She had always warned others, who laughed at her predictions. Dr. Rebecca and Dr. Evan would understand, and listen to her concerns and fears. They had enough of their own. Amber gulped.

Of course, it wasn't long ago historically, at her age, she would be an adult, with all the knowledge she needed to know already learned. Dr. Rebecca, Dr. Evan, and even Alex treated her like an adult. Bravely, she would carry on and learn what she needed circumspectly. She took a deep breath and pocketed her phone.

A young soldier showed them to the two rooms. One room for her and Livia. Another for Corbo and Alex. She squeezed Alex's hand and slipped inside. Her partially opened backpack slid to the floor. On top, the pillowcase protected her few possessions.

Corbo helped Livia into the room.

"I'll be fine. You go ahead and sleep," Livia said.

"I'll cover you," Corbo said.

Livia stretched out and Corbo smoothed the covers over her.

"Do you need anything?" Amber asked.

Livia shook her head, and drifted off to sleep.

Amber stepped back to her cot and settled in, fingering the map on her pillowcase between her hands. What changes would come next? She drifted off to sleep, dreading the wakeup call.

Light under the doorway woke her. Footsteps echoed down the hall.

"Ladies, Gentlemen, are you awake? Your presence is requested in the cafeteria. You will lunch with Dr. Rebecca."

Livia giggled. "Yes sir. We will be there in five minutes. Though, we may need a guide. The maze of this building confuses me."

"I'll wait for you."

Amber sat up and stretched. Almost enough sleep to be called a nap. She would sleep tonight, if they had a chance. "Livia do you need help?"

"Yes, my bad foot is tangled in the blanket."

Amber pulled out her phone and changed her mind. If Karen had called or messaged, she'd wait to check, until she had more news.

It was ten minutes before they all reached the cafeteria.

Dr. Rebecca waited for them.

"Livia, your parents are worried about you. Somehow, they reached my cell phone number. They were evacuated as well. I didn't tell them about your leg, since they didn't ask."

"Thanks. They don't know. No need to worry them. Where are they?"

"They didn't say. Your friends had been calling them before they left. Seems you are missed."

"I'd rather they had forgotten me." Livia entered the serving line.

"Meatloaf and applesauce anyone?" The server held the pan up to show them the dark and dry mixture that was supposed to be juicy meatloaf.

"Okay with me. Some liquidy vegetables too, please," Corbo said.

Alex scrunched his face. "I avoided mystery meat for years."

"I'd prefer the vegetables and the applesauce myself," Livia said. "I keep the meat light."

The woman dished up their food.

"Eat as much as you can. With things in such an uproar, the kitchen is constantly staffed, as people come and go. You all will be at the bottom of the list, as military people running in and out on assignments will come first," Dr. Rebecca said.

Amber gulped. "What is our assignment?"

She smiled. "Stay here and help me accumulate and distribute data."

Alex let out a tiny groan. "I want to be out there. Doing something. Anything to save people."

"Well, they can put a uniform on you, and stick a gun in your hands. At least you could scare people into following evacuation orders." San Antonio's mayor walked behind them with a tray. "Care if I join you?"

The group stared at her.

"What? Can't I make a joke?"

Alex cleared his throat. "Sure, sit down."

She sat and spread her food out on the table.

"You've been places the rest of us haven't, and seen things we haven't seen. What do you think you will be assigned to?" The mayor picked up her cup of tea.

"No idea." Amber moved the food around on her plate.

Someone came up and handed the mayor a message. She read it and sighed. "I have to go. Looters and other problems back in town." Her hand trembled as she placed the note down beside her tray.

"Be careful out there." Her face drawn and pale, she stood up, and carried her teacup with her as she walked away.

Amber grabbed the page and read:

"Flooding, looting, and wild animals attacking pets left stranded in backyards."

"Why do people leave their pets behind?" She passed the page to Alex.

"It's doubtful they had anywhere to take them," Livia said.

Dr. Rebecca nodded. "Most people thought they would be gone a few hours. Taking some food, and maybe a change of clothes, people took half-empty vehicles. It's also probable the shelters would have turned pets away. No one outside of the base knew the true state of the situation."

Bees buzzed in Amber's pocket.

She pulled out her phone.

Karen's name flashed on the screen.

"Karen how are you?"

Screaming and thumping blasted in the background.

"Amber help! It's here too! I think it's the San Andreas. Send dad home, please." The connection clicked off.

Amber glanced up.

Her friend's faces wore worried expressions.

She redialed and waited.

It rang and rang.

Voice mail picked up.

"Karen, Karen, where are you?"

Amber ended the message, and turned to Dr. Rebecca. "She didn't know about her dad?"

Dr. Rebecca shook her head. "Your mom wouldn't call her, until she knew how he was."

"All scientists, specialists, and city manager's report to this morning's meeting area immediately! I repeat, immediately!" The intercom blared.

Amber covered her ears. Tears squeezed out of her eyes. As soon as the message ended, her hands dropped to her lap.

Alex took one hand, and looked deep into her eyes. "We will find her. And we will find your mom. She has to be somewhere."

"We have to go. We have to save who we can." I'll never forget mom, Karen, and Brandon. I'll find them someday, even though we never found dad.

Chapter 39

Los Alamos, New Mexico

Amber and Alex rushed down the hall.

Corbo pushed Livia in an abandoned office chair.

The meeting room clamor grew as they approached. It spilled down the hallway, increasing in bursts.

As they reached the last corner, it decreased to silence as if someone had shut the door.

Amber dashed into the room.

The projector hummed. It had been set to a map of San Francisco.

A large TV screen blared beside it.

Surely, it was a nightmare, or somewhere else.

Buildings fallen, rubble everywhere. Dust billowed on the screen. Fires roared in the background. Sirens blared and lights flashed.

The scene looked like a nightmare movie. Why had they turned on horror movies, when off base was scary enough?

Those tumbling fiery images could happen here. Or in California.

Amber wanted to wake up at home with Karen, Brandon, and her mom. The pictures turned fuzzy, as tears welled in her eyes.

Amber dropped Alex's hand and ran to the front of the room. The screen mesmerized her.

A hand touched her shoulder.

Amber couldn't turn away. She recognized those buildings. One held her favorite seafood restaurant. Her sixteenth birthday party celebration, the lobsters in the tank, and sliding ocean pictures on the wall. The building tilted at the wrong angle. It shouldn't be sideways. Someone couldn't hold the camera upright.

Amber's hands and legs trembled. A warmth filled her body. She gasped for breath. The room cascaded in and out. It was all so unreal. Her hands slipped across the television, and slid down.

Her eyes blinked. She reached for her aching head. Her leg lifted at a strange angle, and her back was on the floor.

Alex's face was above her. He smiled at her.

"It's okay," he whispered. "You haven't had enough to eat, or sleep."

Someone had clicked the TV off.

General Nord stood nearby, ignoring her and Alex.

Dr. Rebecca pushed chairs over to them.

General Nord pointed to the projector screen. "Earthquakes are increasing elsewhere. It isn't only here."

He turned to the table. "Dr. Rebecca, are the reports in?"

Dr. Rebecca walked up to the screen and pointed. "Our biggest fears have been realized this morning. The last few days have shown an increase in number and intensity of quakes in California."

She paused and looked around the room. "Two of the top geologists from Parkfield were here. Others were going to Colorado, to help monitor the quakes here, the increase in California, and elsewhere in the world."

Dr. Rebecca looked right at Amber. "We don't know how many were left in California. Or are alive."

Amber groaned.

"Right now, this quake, an estimated 8.5, was near the San Francisco bay. Either on the San Andreas Fault, or the Hayward Fault, we may not know for hours."

Dr. Rebecca turned the TV back on and the scenes of devastation filled the room. She walked over to Amber, and rested her hands on Amber's shoulders.

General Nord stepped up. "I am going to have to ask all of you to not make cell phone calls right now. The circuits will overload if we all call at once. We are trying to determine what to do."

"Did my dad and Tom make it to Colorado?" Alex asked.

General Nord turned to him. "Dr. Rebecca?"

"They were scheduled to land in San Francisco before this last quake hit. Perhaps, Alex should call?"

The General nodded at him.

People rustled in the background.

Alex pulled out his phone, and dialed his dad's number.

A wave of relief washed across his face.

Amber listened to his side of the conversation.

"Thank goodness you are safe, and the plane was running late. Where are you? Low on fuel. Not sure if the pilot can make it. Please call as soon as you land." Alex faced the room. "If they run out of fuel, they will try to land somewhere. They don't know where. That was a long flight across the Pacific. They could be anywhere."

His face turned red.

Amber reached out to him. This would not be an easy day for

anyone.

Voices clamored all around them.

The room spun.

Alex whispered something through the din.

Amber grabbed his hand, leaned against his shoulder, and closed her eyes.

Chapter 40

Los Alamos, Valles Caldera, Rio Grande Rift, New Mexico

"Alex, are you sure you don't want to go and meet your father?" Dr. Rebecca said.

His right hand shook as he stared at the fault line map of California. He pointed to a few spots right off the coastline. Disturbance and fluctuation recordings in the underwater, and often forgotten, ring of fire volcanic vents along the coast; had been reported in the last few hours.

Amber came up beside him and took his left hand, still in the sling. She looked up at the map, and nodded. "What if they erupt too?"

Alex turned to Dr. Rebecca. "We need to see the maps at a smaller scale, show the whole coast. Can we find up to date pictures?"

She hurried back to the laptop attached to the projector.

Steaming underwater volcanic vents covered the wall. The California coastline flashed over top, volcanic vents dotted in red along the coast.

Amber pulled out her pillowcase. She folded it to show the volcanoes on, and off, the western coast.

Alex took her hand and pointed. There was more than her grandmother had known about.

Silence descended as the room of experts and town leaders watched.

Alex drew the line in the air, blocking parts of the screen. "If the whole line erupts at once, it could push the plates east, causing the faults to slip, pushing it back west. Common sense says it would create an equilibrium. However, it wouldn't."

He turned to Dr. Rebecca. "How long until Hawaii is inundated by tsunamis from this last quake?"

"Maybe a few hours."

"If a double whammy occurs, it could shift plates throughout the whole country. The waves of tsunamis could affect the whole planet."

News stories of years past, and video of countries drowned by waves that raced around the planet echoed in his memory.

Amber squeezed his hand. "We will survive."

He smiled down at her. "Yes, many of us will. So many won't. Transporting everyone to safety would take time, money, fuel, and resources we don't have."

"We'll rock like toy sailboats, when a cat jumps in the tub," Amber said. "The plates move slowly, often merely millimeters a year, or century. When one big change happens, it pushes the others to extremes. It'll never be the same here, or anywhere, ever again."

Alex's phone chimed. "Hey Dad, where are you?"

"Hi son, we are in Stockton. We won't be here long. Devastation is awful. We want to come out there, to where you are, and skip Colorado. Unless, you come with us."

"I want you and Tom safe. Amber and I have a job to do."

His dad breathed deeply. "Alex, I know you do. I want to be there."

"Your life matters. Please, go somewhere safe."

"There is nowhere safe. I'm coming. If I die, I will die beside my only child, and I won't be alone."

Tears rolled down his cheeks as he nodded. It would be hard for his dad to keep up due to his bad knee. He wanted to see him again.

The room began to shake. Chairs rattled.

Alex dropped to the floor, dragging Amber down beside him.

Lights flickered.

The room went dark.

People screamed.

The light from his open phone shone as crashes sounded outside.

The emergency lights flickered on. Sirens wailed.

Alex peered at his phone. His dad had been cut off. He would be here in a few hours, if all went well.

General Nord shouted.

The crowd calmed.

People struggled to their feet.

"Is everyone okay?" General Nord asked.

The lights flickered on, blinked, and stayed on.

A few trickles of blood splashed on arms and hands of the people near him. People murmured, checking their neighbors.

"Okay, Dr. Rebecca, what can you see?"

Dr. Rebecca took a deep breath and reached to her computer.

It would take a few minutes to reconnect to the Internet. People chattered as they waited.

She clicked through social media sites. Posts flew down the page.

Alex read a few as they flashed by on the screen. He held Amber close.

At last, Dr. Rebecca answered the expectant room. "Potential 8.0 near the Valle's Caldera."

Faces paled. A few miles away, the Valle's Caldera, a dormant supervolcano, slumbered in the desert. Maybe, it dozed no longer.

"Dr. Evan, the geothermal mines, in the caldera, how deep were they?" General Nord asked.

"I don't know the actual depth. They promised they were safe, and hoped the power would make a difference, since green power is required by law now." Dr. Evan sat down next to Dr. Rebecca.

"We have to go see if it caused the faults to shift." Amber said.

More danger. Alex's arm slumped. Data changed too fast to wait on the satellites. "General, we have to go out there. If the rocks between the water table and the lava plume burst. We have to know. It could be hours before the satellites have pictures."

"How long would it take you to know something?" General Nord stared at him.

"A fly around would give us a lot of information. I don't have any equipment with me. We will have to rely on what we see."

"I have a few instruments," Dr. Evan said. "If I can find them."

General Nord looked around the room and sighed. "Fine. I'll have a pilot take you in a helicopter. Be careful. Be back as soon as you can. And, call in any major reports. I won't risk any men, or women, at this point. We need you here to interpret the data." He nodded to a woman in uniform, and pointed to Alex.

She came over to him. "I'm Gina. I'll relief pilot as soon as a helicopter is back. Let's go find what you need."

People and tumbled chairs throughout the building made collecting equipment tedious for Alex, Amber, Gina, and Dr. Evan. It wasn't long until they, and their equipment, were in the helicopter, ready to take off.

Before Gina started the helicopter, she handed them earplugs. "No time to train you how to use the noise reducing headphones."

Alex held his seat tight.

Amber frowned, watching the ground as they rose and flew.

Data they gathered could mean the difference between life and death for the people of New Mexico. Gina would have to be careful flying between trees and near cliffs. If a quake occurred, it could send normally stable trees or boulders crashing into them.

Gina pointed as they flew into the first section of the caldera region.

Alex hadn't been there before, so he couldn't recognize changes. He wished someone had come with them who did know the region. Windy would have known who to send.

He patted Gina's arm, and pointed down, they had to explore it from the ground, and quickly.

She pointed to the southwest.

A few minutes later, they circled an area covered with steaming fumaroles, mud pits, and springs.

Alex held Amber's hand as she stared out the window.

Gina landed.

They jumped out, and hurried to check the composition of the gasses in the air. Several numbers were higher than Alex expected. Though, he had no idea what the normal numbers were for this valley.

On the hike back to the helicopter, they coughed from the gasses emitted from the steaming pits. Mudflows oozed nearby, seeping across the ancient caldera through tiny ruts and cracks.

Amber tapped Gina's arm. "Can we check the Rio Grande Rift area too? It isn't far."

"I am almost afraid to. We need to know. I have to ask permission." Gina pulled out her phone and called. Within minutes, she had General Nord on the line. "Yes sir. Not sure sir. They don't seem too concerned. Okay."

She covered the phone with her hand. "Alex, will you speak with Dr. Rebecca?"

He nodded, and reached his hand out.

"Dr. Rebecca? Seems stable at the moment." He read out the numbers the machine had taken, at least the important ones.

"Amber wants to see the Rio Grande so we can give a full report. Thanks!" He handed the phone back to Gina. His feet shuffled on the uneven ground.

She waited a minute. "Yes sir. First sign of trouble, and we will be right back!"

Amber reached up and hugged him.

A warm glow surged through him as he hugged her back. A safe warmth, not like the boiling inferno that lay beneath their feet.

The helicopter raced the clouds eastward.

Alex surveyed the broken land beneath him. Buildings damaged, roofs fallen in, fences on the ground. Herds of cattle and horses roamed free. Even if the world picked back up where it had left off, many would never return home again.

Alex squeezed Amber's hand. If his dad had landed safe in Colorado, he'd call soon. Or, perhaps he was flying to New Mexico, what was left of it.

At last, they reached the Rio Grande. Where before, it had been reduced to a gentle stream, it was now a raging torrent, waiting to break through the dams, as the engineers had hoped. Trees whipped by currents in the middle of the river struggled to remain upright.

South, the land buckled, with fresh scars. Dirt and boulders piled in fresh mounds, on the east and west banks. Trickles of water formed new streams in places that normally were dry desert, though they may have once been creek beds, millennia before, as the Inland Sea dried up.

Amber reached for her phone, tapped it, and Gina's shoulder. Too noisy to try to talk, they waited while Gina turned around, and raced back to base.

As they touched down, Amber squeezed Alex's hand and smiled at him. As long as he could keep her close, he'd be fine. No matter what Mother Nature chose to do.

Amber let go and sprinted into the building, with Alex a step behind. She reached the door of the empty conference room and collapsed in a seat, giggling. Alex sat beside her and reached for her hand.

"Sorry, couldn't help laughing." She looked up into his eyes, and leaned forward.

He bent down and his lips touched her forehead.

"They should be here any minute," Dr. Rebecca said.

Alex snapped backwards.

Dr. Rebecca stepped around the doorframe. Her hand reached to hide her face, though her eyes couldn't hide the smile.

"They're already in here. Does anyone know where Corbo and Livia went?"

Dr. Rebecca walked into the room, followed by some of General Nord's helpers. She shook her finger at them with a smile, and

walked forward. "What did you two see?"

Alex and Amber described the devastation in the caldera and destruction on the Rio Grande. They were almost finished when Dr. Evan entered the room.

He walked up to Dr. Rebecca and whispered something.

She nodded and turned to Alex and Amber. "What you are about to see is top secret. The news would start a panic. The Coco's and Caribbean plates have shifted north. This has pushed the North American plate back into the North Atlantic ridge."

Amber trembled. "It's full of volcanoes. It'll bounce back, and when it does."

"The Atlantic will slosh over the coastlines on both sides," Alex said.

"We have to warn the people. Evacuate the cities." Amber clenched her fists.

Dr. Evan shook his head. "I wish we could. We can only guess what will happen. Not be one hundred percent sure. Imagine the traffic jams, the looting, and the deaths as people try to escape the overcrowded east coast cities. It took almost a day to evacuate for a hurricane. We may not have that much time. And, people won't be so orderly. People at jobs, or on vacation have had no warning, and would want to rush home for belongings and pets."

"So we wait and do nothing?" Amber said.

"With all the nuclear reactors on the east coast, there is no way to move everyone to safety. The whole population of the country couldn't fit into the area where there has been no deformation," Dr. Rebecca said.

She turned on the projector to the worldwide quake-monitoring site. The world map dotted with dozens of high magnitude quakes, and hundreds of low intensity quakes. "This is the last few hours. There is nowhere to go." Dr. Rebecca said.

"General Nord will figure something out. Nuclear plants can be shut down. People can be evacuated at least fifty miles from the reactors. Some people will survive." One of the soldiers said.

"I miss mom. Will I ever see Karen again?" Amber asked.

Where is my dad? Alex held her close.

General Nord walked into the room. "People are scared. We have informed them that evacuating inland, and away from faults, is a good idea."

"Thank you, sir. If we can do anything to help, let us know." Alex said.

"Take care of yourselves. We need you, and your friends." General Nord stared at the projected map. More dots lit up.

Chapter 41

Los Alamos, New Mexico

Amber checked her phone. No new messages from Karen. Anything could have happened after the quake. If Jerry were with her, she wouldn't be alone. Amber dialed her number. It went directly to voice mail. Cell towers would be out all over the region.

The conference room door slammed open.

Corbo pushed Livia in an office chair into the room. He closed the door behind him.

"Sir. I haven't spoken before. Livia's friends. Well, they aren't her friends anymore."

General Nord turned to stare at Corbo. "What did they do?"

Livia pulled her hands down from her face. It was pale against the white blanket around her shoulders. "Josie called. I don't know what's wrong with them!" She hid her face.

General Nord turned to Dr. Rebecca. "Talk to her."

Amber ran to Livia. "Tell me. Whisper if you have to."

Corbo stood strong and waited.

Livia pulled her hands away. "They are picketing outside San Antonio. They'll all die!" She burst into sobs.

Amber grabbed her hand and turned to the general. "Sir these people are misguided. They don't know a thing about science. They are a danger to themselves; and will scare any citizens they find. Can we save them?"

"Have you met them?" General Nord asked.

Amber sat back still holding Livia's hand. "I met Josie and Nathan. They didn't seem bad at the time. From what Livia said, they were the tamer ones of the bunch."

Livia nodded. "Sir, Josie and Nathan were like me, once. Then, they joined this group that has increased pressure to doubt and disbelieve anything known scientifically. They believed their religious ideas were the answer to all questions and problems."

She shook her head. "I never knew much science. It wasn't my favorite subject in school. However, I've seen what Amber and Alex know. These quakes are science problems, not religious. We need Amber and Alex's answers. I'll change my phone number so they

can't call me anymore."

Dr. Rebecca closed her laptop lid. "No. Josie and Nathan would call and worry your parents constantly. General Nord, can we do anything?"

He sighed. "How many people?"

"Three bus loads," Livia said. "If you send someone, I'm going. I have to stop them before they hurt themselves, or anyone else."

"You can't go," Corbo said. "You can't walk far."

"I'll go." Livia said.

Amber squeezed her hand. "We'll all go. General Nord, can you help us?"

The door opened and a soldier walked in and handed a note to General Nord. He nodded at the soldier and read the note.

General Nord sighed. He shook his head and turned to the wall where the map had been a few moments before.

"I have to keep busy. I can't sit here," Amber said. "If you don't send me to San Antonio, send me back to Kirtland to search for my mom."

General Nord placed the paper next to Dr. Rebecca's laptop.

"Kirtland isn't accessible for you now. Neither is San Antonio."

Amber groaned and clutched Livia's hand.

He nodded to the soldier beside him.

"However, the mayor of San Antonio has demanded accompaniment of someone who knows these people. Her efforts to send a rescue team in alone were not fruitful."

General Nord looked at each of them. "Alex, Corbo, are you willing and able to attempt to protect yourselves, and these brave young women?"

Amber blushed. Even though she thought of herself as an adult, she didn't expect General Nord to think of her as such.

"Yes sir." Alex walked over and stood behind Amber. "I will be there."

Corbo nodded. "Don't leave any of us behind."

General Nord smiled. "I understand your fears Corbo. Your situation is being looked into. You will not be left behind, unless you choose to stay."

General Nord turned to the soldier. "Ready Gina, and three other helicopters. They leave in ten minutes."

Hope swelled through Amber. At least by staying busy she wouldn't have time to think about her mom, Brandon, or Karen. She stood up.

The group turned to hurry to the helicopter take off area she and Alex had left such a short time ago.

"Amber," General Nord said.

Amber turned back to him.

"Your mom is tough. Dr. Rebecca knows her well, and says you are just like her. She may not be at Kirtland."

Amber's mind reeled. Where could her mom be then?

General Nord held his hand up. "I've no idea. And if I did, I couldn't tell you."

Alex grabbed her shoulders, and turned her out of the conference room.

They all smiled excitedly as they rushed down the hall.

Outside the door to the helicopter area Amber stopped. None of the pilots had arrived.

"Do you think he knows where she is?" Amber whispered.

Alex shook his head. "I think he knows she went to find Brandon. Or at least hopes so."

"I hope so to," Amber said. If her mom had escaped, she could survive at least as well as Amber.

The door behind them opened.

Gina and the other pilots came out the door, dressed for battle.

Chapter 42

Los Alamos, New Mexico to San Antonio, New Mexico

The drone of the helicopter blades drowned out conversation.

Gina's copilot handed out noise canceling headsets.

Amber checked the headset and put it on.

"You won't be able to speak to people outside the helicopter," the copilot said. "Keep these on while we are moving to hear changes in directions. Can everyone hear me?"

Amber nodded.

Alex, Corbo, Livia, and San Antonio's mayor did as well.

"If an emergency comes up, push this button, and I, or Gina will hear you. We can override you."

Amber nodded again. Good to know.

Amber wiggled, unable to be still. There wasn't much time to save the religious fanatics. If they found and rescued them, maybe Gina would fly a line across the route Amber's mom might have taken to find Brandon. She bounced in her seat with hope.

Alex laughed.

Outside, the scenery slowly changed as they flew down the river. A little less than one hundred and fifty miles by air. The water swirled, with nowhere to go. Trees, brush, and anything caught in its path swept along caught behind the blockade. At least they were far enough up; they couldn't see if the bits were people or animals.

Amber pointed as they came closer to San Antonio.

Three tour buses parked beside the river in a field. A crowd of people chanted and yelled toward the buckled bridge across the river. The bridge they had driven across on the way to Kirtland days before, which Dr. Evan didn't trust.

The mayor of San Antonio sat across from Amber and wrung her hands.

Gina's copilot pointed at their bags.

The helicopters descended.

Amber grabbed her backpack and walking stick. Not much protection if the crowd turned unruly, as they were likely to do. However, there had been no time for them to learn how to use a

more reliable weapon.

Gina sat the helicopter down as gently as she could.

The blades rotated slower and slower.

The door opened and her copilot stepped out. He held his out to San Antonio's mayor.

When the mayor stepped out, the crowd roared.

"Send them away!"

"Give us our river back!"

"Give us our land back!"

The mayor held her hand up and waited for the relative calm that the over one hundred and fifty people gathered on the river's edge would give her. The river's gurgle would not quiet.

The mayor raised a megaphone to her mouth. "Do any of you live in San Antonio?"

Amber stood inside the helicopter behind the mayor.

Alex and Corbo behind her.

A few raised their hands.

"The town has been evacuated for safety reasons. A series of waves will flood through here shortly." The mayor waved her arm.

"Please, return to your buses for an escort to safety."

The protestors screamed and shouted, running towards the helicopter.

Amber gripped her walking stick.

Soldiers stepped out of the other three helicopters and formed a semi-circle around the mayor.

The ground shook.

Amber grabbed Alex's arm.

The crowd paused as if against a brick wall.

Amber, Alex, and Corbo stepped down to the ground beside the mayor.

Livia hobbled to the door.

The river swirled and sloshed over its banks.

"You've come!" Josie shouted. "Come join us. Or have you chosen to join them?"

A section of riverbank slid off into the river, sloshing debris and water onto the crowd.

Nathan stepped beside Josie.

"Please. Go to safety. You have so much to live for. Please go." Livia waved at them with a crutch.

They wouldn't listen to her. Josie and Nathan didn't really know her.

"If you're not going to stop the scientists, then go away," Josie said.

Gina stepped to the door of the helicopter. "This field will be underwater in ten minutes. A quake upriver has burst the dams."

Amber glanced at Alex.

His face was pale.

"Go now." The mayor's voice cracked and as she stepped back into the helicopter.

Amber climbed back in, followed by Corbo and Alex.

The crowd roared and screamed some more.

Soldiers rushed back to their helicopters.

Amber's heart quivered. If Josie and Nathan had tried, they might have been able to convince the group to leave.

They all pulled their headsets on. At least they protected their hearing a little.

Livia's pale faced streaked with tears as she clung to Corbo.

Gina pulled the helicopter up off the ground, and hovered in a circle with the other three.

The crowd yelled and threw stones at the helicopters.

Within moments, the wave appeared on the horizon.

Amber held her breath. The crowd couldn't escape now.

They stopped and stared at the wave. Unmoving.

Over the sound of the chopper's blades Gina's copilot spoke into the headphones. "Anyone else hear the voice?"

"What voice?" Amber said.

"My children and grandchildren will fight no more. What can it mean?" The copilot turned to them and slumped in his seat.

Gina stared at him. Then, she raced ahead of the other helicopters as they returned to Los Alamos.

Amber glanced back one last time.

The bodies of the protesters washed across the plain.

###

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Trails: First Generation

Volcano

Pair 1, Book 1

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Chapter 1

Los Alamos, New Mexico and University of Arizona

Amber grabbed the phone as it buzzed like a beehive. A text icon blinked on the screen.

She closed her eyes before opening the screen. There were only two people she wanted to hear from. Maybe a third.

The message opened. "Safe. Scared. Send dad home. Can't reach him. Please come."

Tears rolled down Amber's cheeks. Tears of joy that her best friend Karen was safe. And tears of fear as her mom and Brandon were still among the millions missing.

Her thumbs twitched as she struggled to form a coherent answer.

"Who is it?" Alex asked.

"Karen." Amber dropped the phone to her lap. "What do I say?"

"Ask her where she is before you lose connection. We need her," Alex said.

"Where are you?" Amber typed and hit send.

"The lab. It's empty. Jerry died saving me. Where is everyone?"

Alex glanced over her shoulder. "Tell her to stay put. We need the equipment, and her, when your mom finds Brandon."

Amber typed to Karen. Then she looked up at Alex. "Do you think we'll find them?"

He hugged her close and whispered in her ear. "One way, or another."

Amber pulled away and waited on Karen's reply.

The office door creaked open.

"Thought I'd find you two here. Any news?" Dr. Rebecca asked.

"Karen's alive, and at Parkfield research center. We have to rescue her." Amber gripped her phone.

Dr. Rebecca rubbed her hands through her hair.

"Dad already said we need the equipment from there. Can we get clearance to join on retrieving it?" Alex rested his hand on her shoulder.

"I actually intended to send you both to a meeting at a bio lab,"

Dr. Rebecca said.

"What help could we be there? I don't know anything about biology." Especially after last month's uncertainty of the animals they might meet on Magdalena Peak.

Dr. Rebecca laughed. "You don't need to know anything really. They need your knowledge of where the faults are splitting, and Alex's knowledge of the magma plumes. Will you go?"

"When and where?" At least it would keep her mind busy, while waiting to hear if her mom and Brandon were safe.

"University of Arizona. Gina will be piloting both of you. With so much shattered infrastructure, we don't dare risk the time, or road hazards, of driving such a distance." Dr. Rebecca sat down at an empty table and pulled out her phone.

At least there wouldn't be anything to pack. Amber's backpack sat on the chair beside her ready to go at a moment's notice. In fact, it was never far away anymore. Quakes occurred daily, almost hourly now. She turned to the laptop. This morning, a 3.6 in the San Andrea's wouldn't have done any damage, if it hadn't been for the 8.5 a month ago, and dozens more of varying strength since then. Other than Karen's frantic call, it seemed all connection with the majority of California had been cut off for over a week.

"I'll call dad," Alex said.

Before long, Gina knocked on the door. "Ready to go?"

"As ready as I'll ever be." Amber accepted the earplugs Gina dangled in front of her. She'd rather rescue Karen than go someplace and repeat the nightmare of the last month plus. Surely, these biologists in Arizona knew as much as she did about what was going on. After all, the ground quaked and rifted everywhere. Even if the satellites were able to collect the information of all the quakes, there weren't many remaining stations with power to download it all.

When they reached the campus, Gina sat the helicopter down in an open space near a building. She turned it off and waited for the blades to stop turning.

Two women and a man walked toward them and greeted them.

"General Nord called a moment ago. He needs you to refuel and go on to Parkfield as soon as possible." Dr. Cora Jonas held out her hand.

"Good," Amber said.

"I'll refuel, and be back." Gina returned to the helicopter.

The blades turned slowly, and picked up speed before Gina lifted off to fly to the nearest base.

Dr. Emily Barkley turned to Amber. "I'm the lead scientist here. It's bad isn't it?"

Alex nodded. "Evacuations were successful, unless Amber's prediction happens. Then, nowhere is safe. Plate movement is unpredictable. We have tried to convince the military to stabilize their weapons storage areas."

"We have weapons here to. Some even more dangerous, as they can't be seen. What do you recommend?" Dr. Barkley looked from one to the other of them.

"What weapons do you have?" A university shouldn't have weapons of any sort.

"Come on, I'll show you." Dr. Barkley pulled a large heavy door open.

She led them inside what appeared to be a four-story building. Inside, a window lit stairwell led multiple stories underground, as well as up three floors. Their guide led them up a flight of stairs, and down a long, dark, narrow hall. She stopped at a door that required an electronic pass card for entry. Without a struggle, the scientist uncovered the battery panel, and unlocked the door.

Sunshine streamed in through small windows above the cabinets. Locked cabinets lined the walls. Poles were positioned near several red cabinets with chemical placards pasted on them.

"Second floor to avoid floods, unlikely as they are in Tucson. These cabinets contain enough materials to start a toxic biological war, with no end in sight. Many of these superbugs have no known antidote. Or, they are antibiotic resistant. And with most pharmacies closed due to power loss, even if an antidote exists, few people could receive it." She shook her head and turned away.

Dr. Mark Marten walked to a red door at the end of the long room. "Back here, there are even more. And three additional levels of security. I can't even take you in there without high security clearance. General Nord said to tell you, not show you specifics." His hand jiggled the doorknob. The card reader blinked red.

"What are we to do with these? Here, and other parts of the country, have just as dangerous of materials." Dr. Marten's eyes gazed across the room.

Tables filled with lab equipment, beakers, test tubes, wires, and so many unusual glass and metal pieces, Amber couldn't name them all. A poster hung on the wall over one workstation. "Mistakes here can save lives elsewhere." Only, that might not be true anymore.

There wasn't much she or Alex could tell them. The continent was ripping apart under their feet. It wasn't known if the splits included Arizona, at the moment. There weren't enough seismologists to be everywhere. Arizona and all those other labs across the country were depending on her answer. Amber gulped and glanced at Alex. There might not be anywhere safe to send all of this material.

Alex stepped into a sunbeam. "It isn't easy to know. What can destroy them?"

"Some can be destroyed by heat. Others by cold. Some have no known way to be destroyed." Dr. Barkley moved a folder and leaned against a work station.

"If we bury them deep in the ground, will they be able to escape? They would contaminate the soil and water if they did." Amber's hands shook. A quake or volcanic eruption could bring them back to the surface, possibly spreading them faster than they ever had before. Without antidotes, millions more people, and animals, would die.

Dr. Marten sighed. "I was afraid you might not have an answer. We have to hope. I recommend we send them to the somewhere similar to the Svalbard seed vault. The hazardous vault wouldn't need much space. Governments are trying to fill Svalbard with seeds and plant starts in case of worldwide disaster. There's even been talk of frozen animal and human embryos being stored there."

Amber pulled away from Alex. "That would work. Store the biohazards there, in the deep freeze. Distribute the seeds around the world. We'll even take some ourselves to share around. Are there other places where the embryos can be stored?"

"I think they've already sent the embryos there. They require special treatment. We could send the biological hazards to a few other similar government type facilities. There's one in Colorado, the Cheyenne Mountain."

Amber closed her eyes. Too close to Yellowstone. If the mountains collapsed, maybe they would not escape. "A last resort. Yellowstone is a danger."

"Is anywhere not a danger?" Dr. Marten asked.

Anywhere could be dangerous. "What about salt mines for extra seeds and anything else? If the mountains have sealable vaults, it might work to send your weapons there."

Alex leaned against a counter. "That sounds good. Seeds can save us all."

"Wouldn't work," Dr. Barkley said. "Too few people know how to farm anymore, and we don't know what the climate may be like next year."

"Sure we do," Amber said. "If Yellowstone erupts, we will be in permanent winter for years. We can transfer both colder climate seeds and regular climate seeds to many places, and share books, both in print, and on computer disk, so people can learn to grow what should grow in their area. It'll keep people from panicking as they await the inevitable."

"You think the military would allow fuel use for the project?"

Alex glanced at the room of equipment and rubbed his healed arm. "I think so. We can ask General Nord. Are they already rationing fuel for your projects too?"

Dr. Barkley nodded. "That's why we called for your help. It isn't much. Maybe a few loads back and forth will complete the projects. We aren't sure how much longer the other research facilities will have power, or working internet. It may be our only answer."

Helicopter blades whirred outside. Gina was back. She wouldn't be able to wait on them.

"Thanks." Dr. Barkley's face was long and pale.

"Stay safe," Amber said.

The woman laughed dryly as she picked up a red hazardous waste pail. "We've a lot of work do."

Amber and Alex ran down the stairs and out the door to the waiting helicopter.

Before long, they'd be able to see Karen. Jerry was just a memory now. Karen could come back with her, and be by her side so her numerical mistakes would be caught whenever they calculated notes on the computer. As long as they had working computers. Her throat tightened at the memory of what she would have to do though.

Karen still didn't know her father was missing.

The helicopter soared west.

The countryside flowed under the noisy helicopter, and she could only wish they could have taken it to search for her mom and Brandon as easily. Perhaps General Nord would give them the opportunity when they returned.

Chapter 2

From University of Arizona to Long Valley Caldera and Parkfield, California

A mountain range covered the horizon. Alex gulped. Long Valley caldera, one of the supervolcanoes, would be outside their direct path. If it were venting, they needed to know. Before they reached Parkfield.

"Gina, do we have enough fuel to check Long Valley?" Even if he didn't really want to see it, they had to know if California was going to be rattled by a line of volcanoes to the east, as well as the west. If the San Andreas, and associated faults, ruptured down the middle, the parts of California that survived would become an island surrounded by fiery seas.

"Enough fuel for a flyby. We can't stop though. No telling how active the region is. With so many stations knocked offline, we don't know what's really happening here." Gina turned the helicopter toward the north.

His dad would be expecting them to arrive at Parkfield. Tom would be with him. So much had changed since he had seen both of them. Now, he could joke with his dad about volcano injuries. Alex's arm had healed now, with only an occasional slight pain. His dad's injuries would never heal. A re-injury to his arm could leave him in the same predicament. Especially with medical care being even more rare now.

"Gina, please call dad, and tell him we'll be late," Alex said. She would be able to contact them through her headset. The rest of them wouldn't hear the conversation, because of the noise in the helicopter.

Amber's knee brushed his as she surveyed the scenery below them. She had said almost nothing on this flight. Normally, he would have expected her to talk about all the science happening under their feet. While he had felt at home in the biology lab, she had been nervous. The pressure of recent events bubbled to the top of his emotions, and likely hers as well.

Below them, mists, or perhaps steam, drifted over the mountains. A late afternoon cloud haze created a blurry maze of trees. Amber

grabbed his hand and pointed. One peak was on fire. People waved burning tree limbs for help.

He stared at them. It reminded him of the night on Magdalena Peak. Guide ended up with a broken leg. Livia's broken ankle, and Corbo by her side. Amber tended to them all, and tenderly touched his broken arm. The memory sent a rush of warmth up his spine. Amber wasn't so caring tonight.

Gina couldn't stop. There wouldn't be room for anyone not already scheduled on this mission. Leaving them to their fate would result in their deaths. Not that anyone could do anything about it. Those people should have evacuated months ago. Though where to, Alex wasn't sure.

Beyond the fire, more trees blazed on a distant mountain top. It could be a campfire gone wrong. Someone not used to living on the edge who had survived the quakes, and might die at their own hand. He shielded his eyes, searching for signs of people. No one in sight.

"Almost there," Gina said. "Beyond this smoke column."

Amber squeezed his hand. "It can't be worse than what we've already seen."

Slivers of a large lake glistened in the evening sunshine. Plumes of smoke from countless fumaroles spiraled into the sky beyond. The ground seethed with hot springs, water, and lava vying for the same channels through the land.

Beyond, more mountains, and more lakes, would look the same. No time, or safe place, to stop to take measurements. If only he had thought of strapping a COSPEC to the outside of the helicopter, he might have been able to collect some useful readings.

Gina turned back southeast and dashed for Parkfield. It would be nearly dark when they arrived. Flaming mountains, and worried biologists in Arizona. Lost in thought was easier than talking through headsets.

Hopefully, all the biological weapons in California were already buried somewhere safe. The plan was a quick rescue of Karen and equipment, and then a hasty retreat to somewhere safe before California smashed itself to pieces around them.

No lights were on at Parkfield. Equipment littered the ground by tumbled building blocks. Two other parked helicopters with stilled blades rested almost outside the rubble. A few people stood near a door surrounding a roofless, rubble filled space.

When Gina nodded, Alex and Amber climbed down from the helicopter.

Amber raced to the young woman standing alone who must be Karen. She hugged her and cried. Though their mouths moved, Alex couldn't hear the words.

Tom hurried over, arms loaded with equipment, "We were wondering if you would arrive before dark. Hoped you hadn't gone down in the mountains."

"We're okay. We saw Long Valley. Where's dad?"

"Around the corner. You have a few minutes before we leave."

"Food, and few minutes without vibration," Alex said. "I won't be able to walk right for weeks."

Tom laughed as he and a two other pilots stacked equipment into the helicopter.

Gina supervised the load.

His dad rested on a broken block in the shade. A small red box rested on his knee, and his fingers caressed the lid.

"Dad?"

His dad tapped the lid. "Hi son. Going to entrust this to you."

Alex sat beside his dad and pulled out a granola bar. "What is it?"

"Plastic eating bacteria. Sadly, we don't know if there will be any consequences. The president has ordered adding some to every landfill we can find. We hope it won't make a larger catastrophe. People have already done so much else wrong to this planet."

"This destruction goes beyond anything that's our fault." Alex nibbled the last bite. Not a meal. He needed real food, and soon. Handling bacteria while eating didn't seem like a good idea.

"It's the president's orders to try to erase as much of the damage we have done as we can. I'm going with the group to see the remains of Hawaii, and add bacteria to the garbage patch swept off the island, to try to save the marine life for my grandchildren." His dad touched Alex's hand.

"I can't walk and explore like you can. This I can do. Stay safe." His dad squeezed his hand.

"You want me to take some back?"

His dad nodded. "General Nord has asked that you and Amber go directly to Oklahoma. After I visit the Pacific Garbage Patches, I'm going to Yellowstone."

"Dad, don't go there."

"I have to." His dad squeezed his hand. "Someone has to document it for future generations. The internet is barely working, so we can't rely on it."

"Alex, it's time to go." Amber's hands clutched at her waist as tears dripped down her cheek.

"Take this." Alex's dad handed him the red box. "I hope to see you again. She's pretty. Tom will help me up."

Alex turned away. His dad didn't want him to see how bad his knee was.

Amber took his hand and led him back to the helicopter. Her fist was clenched against her face.

"Where's Karen?"

"She's going with Tom. Karen's." Amber looked away and refused to speak.

Alex sighed. Amber was an enigma. So happy at times. Too silent at others. Whatever had happened couldn't be good. He tried to take her hand and she pulled away.

He slid into the seat beside her and placed the red box at his feet. What it contained could remove plastics from landfills, and their lives forever. The unknown, unintended effects, could devastate in unexpected ways. It was dangerous to mess with nature. Nature had a habit of striking back, and trying to maintain balance, something people often forgot.

Gina lifted off. "We'll be stopping for fuel. The trek over the mountains is too much. Have to keep the load light though, so we can make it over easily."

Alex nodded and dozed as the vibration took over.

The pit stop didn't even give them time for a meal. At least a few women brought trays of food to them on the rooftop refueling station.

Gina pulled away.

Several women in dresses stood near the edge of the building. They raised their arms and screamed.

Jumping off, their skirts billowed up around their faces. Images of umbrellas will their hoops flipped inside out filled his mind as they raced away.

Alex gasped and grabbed Amber's hand.

The building crumbled down on top of the women.

Chapter 3

Little Italy Deli, New Mexico and Corbo's family

Livia touched her mother's hand. "We'll be fine. I'm going to stay with Corbo. He needs me."

Her mother wiped away her tears. "You are doing what I wish I had done all those years ago. Of course, then you wouldn't be here. Stay safe."

The door to the living quarters swung open and her dad walked into the restaurant with a backpack. "Can't save it all, can I wifey?"

Something about his tone of voice startled Livia. It sounded defeated.

"I've done all I can. I worked all these years so Livia would have this." He waved around the darkened restaurant. "No electricity for days. Inventory spoiled. I had to feed it to the coyotes. Now to be evacuated. Will the building even be here when, or if, we come back?"

Livia's mom rubbed her eyes and stood up. "We will manage, regardless." She took her husband's hand and pointed him to the door. "You'll lock up?"

"Yes. Corbo should be ready in a few minutes."

Her mother nodded and walked out the door with her head held high.

More tears would come. Without her and Corbo there to remind her every minute of Eduardo, she'd regain her strength and help from the background as she always had at the restaurant. In a few days, they'd be cooking and singing bad Italian songs at some refugee camp.

Livia smiled. No matter how awful the songs were, they'd never make the delicious food taste bad.

"Ready?" Corbo's large frame filled the door to the living quarters.

Livia pushed herself up from the seat beside the table. "Guess I won't push the chairs back in. They'll be waiting for Mom when she comes back." She pulled her backpack onto her good shoulder and grabbed her crutches.

"I can carry your backpack too."

"You'll be carrying the food my parents managed to save. Hopefully it won't spoil before we reach your Aunt Anna."

Her foot gingerly touched the ground. The fall on Magdalena Peak had done more damage than she had told anyone. The nurse at the Immi Clinic had said she'd be lucky if she ever walked without a limp. Amber had done an excellent job wrapping her leg. Without consistent medical treatment, the effects of the break could last a lifetime.

Corbo touched her arm.

Leaning against him, they walked out of the "Little Italy Deli."

She turned the key that locked the door to her childhood home. The alarm couldn't be set. If Amber had been right about Yellowstone, and everything else, neither her, nor her parents would ever return.

Without a backward glance, she followed Corbo to the vehicle General Nord had loaned them. An early solar prototype cart with enhanced abilities when electricity was available. Not normally street legal. However, with fuel being rationed, it would be safe for the short distance they had to travel.

Roads should have been smooth sailing with no traffic. Grass and weeds grew in the pavement cracks. Raggedy people with heavy loads stumbled along them to the evacuation gathering points. Reptiles dozed in the middle of the road, soaking up the sun's rays without danger of being ran over. Stray cows stood on the edges of the road and ate the knee-high grass that exhaust fumes normally kept short.

Corbo drove the struggling vehicle up to a tumbledown farmhouse with a broken porch. "It doesn’t look like much. They'll be in the tenant's house in back."

Livia gulped. If the main house looked destroyed, the place his Aunt Anna and family were staying had to be worse.

"Can you walk? It needs to recharge. Driving was too much this time."

"I guess I have to." She clutched her backpack.

He grinned at her. "I can carry you, and then come back for our belongings."

With so many desperate people on the roads? She didn't want to lose any of the few possessions she had kept. Gripping her phone in her hand, she braced her teeth to put her foot on the ground.

"You came." His Aunt Anna faltered at the corner of the farmhouse. "Thank you."

"We are here to learn all you know about my parents. We can't stay." Corbo pulled his backpack onto his shoulder.

The woman nodded and wrung her hands. "Hand me your backpacks. Livia will need help." She fluttered around like a butterfly, lighting touching Livia and Corbo, their vehicle, and their backpacks.

Corbo settled her on a lawn couch, under a porch. He lifted her foot up on a box. A dilapidated house crumbled behind her. The outdoor living space in front of her pulsed with hope and possibility. On another couch nearby, Corbo's Uncle Jon reclined, his broken leg requiring him to rest, and not walk.

At her feet, Corbo tossed bits of dried grass in the air.

A barn cat reached for the sunshine as it slid across the porch.

"Will you stay here, please?" Aunt Anna said.

"Until Livia can walk, or we hear from General Nord. I asked for help before we left."

The only family he had ever known was quiet compared to her noisy dad. They barely spoke, not looking at one another. Words seemed to have failed them completely.

"What can you tell us about Adora?" Livia asked.

The woman turned to her. "My sister was beautiful. Wish I had a picture of her. We had nothing in Mexico. There had been hope when she fell in love. Pictures of their wedding day are somewhere. Or were."

A young man walked around the house and dropped the body of deer. "Corbo, you're home."

Corbo sat up. "Desi, it's great to see you again. Your tracking skills haven't suffered due to the earthquakes."

Desi laughed as he joined them. He sat next to Corbo, and glanced at Livia. "Animals are more skittish now. More deer near here foraging now that the grass grows again to hide them. Tell us about you."

Corbo glanced at her. His shoulders relaxed. "We have a little time. Livia has to heal more, and we need a better vehicle to travel."

Desi nodded. "You know if you leave again, I'll track you down."

Corbo laughed. "Go right ahead."

The banter between the two cousins relaxed Livia. Maybe there was hope. Even Corbo's Aunt Anna and Uncle Jon relaxed their stances and smiled as the young men chatted.

Leaning back, Livia adjusted her broken ankle. They had been told not to expect electricity, or fuel, no matter where they went. The

tiny solar cart could only drive a few miles without a stop to recharge. Perhaps they could use the solar power to charge a cell phone and communicate, if any cell towers still had power.

Voices droned on. Heat blanketed her. She closed her eyes. Not a wise idea. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw the river wash away her once friends. Nathan and Josie had fallen into the surge of water as if in a trance. None of the people had screamed or yelled.

After the flash of water down the Rio Grande, dead people were discovered all around the world. It made the news, equal in fear to the quakes. A few newscasters had asked if the deaths could have been caused by gasses released deep in the earth. Why in many places, two people had been talking, and only one died had never been explained. A few autopsies hadn't revealed anything unusual. In some places, whole communities had died. In others, nearly all survived.

Corbo shook her. "You okay? You whimpered."

"Every time I see them die, I think if only I had said, or done something different, they'd still be alive."

Corbo patted her shoulder. He had already said all the words he knew to say about what had happened on that day. There was nothing new to say, and nothing anyone could do to bring them back to life.

If she could walk, Livia would run away as fast as her legs could carry her to cry in peace somewhere alone. As it was, she could only grin and wait on the conversation to change.

Chapter 4

Corbo's family

If Livia's parents had stayed instead of evacuating, Corbo would rather have stayed there. Even if her father was loud, and glared at him. He'd had been glared at all his life by people who didn't understand him.

Her mother hadn't known much more about his father. She had known Eduardo longer than his Aunt Anna and Uncle Jon, whom he had thought were his parents. Corbo touched his head and groaned. He still hadn't called them anything since he returned for this visit. How would they react to being called "Mom" and "Dad" now that they knew he knew they weren't? He could call them "Aunt" and "Uncle," or by their first names. Nothing felt right.

He glanced at the woman he had called "Mom" for seventeen years. She hadn't called him by name either. Silence had been unheard of growing up. Today, no one spoke. Livia had tried to start a conversation, and it had fallen flat.

Desi entered the clearing with a deer. His tracker cousin he had always known as a brother. "Corbo, you're home."

Corbo smiled. "So good to see you."

Desi joined him and the talk turned to family.

"Where is everyone else?"

Desi glanced at his parents. "Didn't they tell you?"

"No. We haven't had much time to talk."

There had been time to talk, and so much to say. No one had spoken much; as if the weight of the truth kept them from even safer small talk.

Desi leaned back against the couch. "The girls left with the evacuation group two days ago. I don't think they will ever come back. Deep anger didn't have time to heal."

"I wish I could have seen them again." Corbo leaned back and placed his head in Livia's hands.

"It might have helped. If you showed enough anger. They've been more upset as time has passed." Desi watched the wispy clouds circling in the sky.

"They'll come. Won't leave Mom and Dad forever," Aunt Anna

said.

"You lied to them, to us, and to Corbo," Desi said. "Did you lie to yourselves as well?"

"No time to talk about it now," Aunt Anna said.

"Now is the time." Desi crossed his arms and stared at his mother. "I want to know when you intended telling us the whole truth. And, when you planned to share Corbo's parent's information with him."

Aunt Anna had tears in her eyes. She tried to wipe them, and squirmed on the couch beside Uncle Jon.

Corbo allowed Desi to speak for him. To say what needed to be said by someone they might listen to as they had never listened to him. That had to stop now. He closed his eyes as he realized he had always let others speak for him. Even Livia had spoken for him many times. "What do you want me to call you now?"

Aunt Anna looked at him. "What do you want to call us?"

"He should call you liars!" Desi slammed his fist on the ground.

"Maybe you can help us find his dad." Livia rubbed Corbo's forehead.

"I've been looking. Brothers went to Arizona to find someone who might know more," Desi said.

"You took all my children from me," Aunt Anna said.

"No. You sent them away. Think about how they feel," Corbo said. "I don't blame them for going. Tell me what you can about my real parents."

"We raised. Best we could." Uncle Jon half sat up, panting from the exertion.

"Please help," Livia said. "Don't blame yourselves, or each other, for the past. We have to go on from here. Windy would expect us to."

Livia would think of Windy now. Yes, Windy would want them to go on, and soon.

"Dark soon, and Desi's deer," Aunt Anna said.

"Okay. Tomorrow we talk," Corbo said.

Desi stalked off and grabbed his deer to finish butchering it.

"So angry. All of them," Aunt Anna said.

"I'll talk to him. No guarantees." Maybe they would tell Livia something helpful when he wasn't there. Finding his father was all that mattered now. Corbo had to find him before the ground swallowed him.

Livia patted his head.

It was almost sad that Aunt Anna and Uncle Jon had done this to themselves. Especially now, when their children might not be able to come back if they wanted to.

"Do you need anything?" He gazed up into Livia's eyes.

Livia shook her head and held her phone tight.

He walked over to the table where Desi stretched out the butchered bits of deer.

Desi kept working. "They claim they know nothing. They lost any papers in that fire after the girls were born. I don't believe it."

"We are still family."

Blood dripped from the knife as Desi raised it in the air. "I always looked up to you as my older brother. I wanted to be like you. They took that away."

Corbo choked back laughter. "You're a hunter and a provider. Me, I'm squeamish at the sight of blood."

Desi looked past him to the group on the patio. "How do we know Dad is really our father now? Mom may be our mom, or not. Remember the school picnics? People thought all of us siblings were unrelated friends. Who are any of us really?"

Corbo closed his eyes and shook his head. The world had seemed so simple all those years ago, as a young child. He opened his eyes and looked at Desi, only two years younger than him. "I remember most of her pregnancies and her talk of the coming babies. Your father hasn't changed."

Desi turned to him. "You don't remember before I was born?"

"I was a baby then."

Desi plunged the knife into the deer hide. "My brothers and sisters, if they are, left in disgust. They'll never come back."

"Aunt Anna is their mother, and Uncle Jon their father," Corbo said.

Desi turned to him, his eyes flashing. "Perhaps. She lied to all of us, all of our lives. She made him keep the lies. I'm the only hunter. I'm not his child."

Chapter 5

Parkfield, California to University of Arizona

Karen couldn't have done what she said. Amber clinched her fists as tears threatened to roll down her cheeks. Her best friend said she was pregnant, and Jerry was the father. She wouldn't face her own father if he was found, so she was going to the garbage patches and Yellowstone with Tom. It all seemed so impossible.

It had only been three months she had been away. So much had changed. Karen had cried as she turned away. Tom had pulled her close, and comforted her.

Amber had to find her mom and Brandon. They were her only family now, and all that mattered. She turned away from Alex and stared out the window. Faults didn't matter anymore. They were all so shattered that no map would even be remotely accurate. It would take generations to rebuild the knowledge that had been lost as the crust slipped and slid beneath their feet. She kicked a box, and didn't care what was in it.

"Don't spill it. It'll eat the bottom of the helicopter," Alex said.

"I don't care. How could she do this?"

"Tell me."

Amber recited what Karen had said. Even now, she knew it was no different in many ways, from what Karen must have planned all along. Trying to fit in, she'd do what others wanted her to do. So much knowledge and ability thrown away on a dead boy.

"We are going to stop back by lab," Gina said.

"Do we have too?" Amber asked.

"General Nord said too. We are taking much of their plastic eating bacteria, and another type that shows promise of cleaning up oil spills. Dr. Rebecca expects the oil rigs to tumble if any more big quakes occur." Gina changed the helicopter's path.

Before long, they reached the buildings they had left behind that morning. It was dark, well into the night.

Dr. Emily Barkley dragged a cart filled with boxes out of the building. "We've had deformation here too."

Amber could barely make out what she said over the noise from the helicopter's blades.

The woman handed the red biohazard boxes to Alex, and he stacked them where Gina pointed.

Dr. Barkley held her thumbs up, and dragged the cart back to the building. It would be a long night in the air, and they were all tired. She dozed under the hum of the blades. She didn't even remember reaching the base, or leaving the helicopter.

Morning came, and Dr. Rebecca shook her arm to wake her. "We have a lot of work to do today."

Amber stretched out on the cot. "What's up for today?"

Dr. Rebecca sat beside her on the floor. "Windy's friend Champ and I are going to the Gulf Coast to visit the oil rigs, then on to the New Madrid faults. Several seismometers have been thrown offline there. I wanted to say goodbye in person."

Amber sat up. "What? Are you leaving me here?"

With a shake of her head, and a pat on Amber's leg, Dr. Rebecca turned to the door. "No. You and Alex will go to a landfill in Santa Fe and release some of the plastic eating bacteria. Then, on to Oklahoma to do the same. Also, the major libraries in New Mexico will be evacuated. If any survival manuals are still in their collections, they will be given to town leaders."

"I can't do it all," Amber said. "I need to find mom and Brandon."

Dr. Rebecca handed her a cloth wrapped package. "You will, I think. We downloaded all the useful data we could find, to save it for future generations. If Yellowstone blows, major food growing regions will be barren next year. Famine will come. Try to stall what you can." Dr. Rebecca stood up and walked out the door.

Amber pulled her backpack closer. The Ring of Fire pillowcase spilled out into her lap. The only connection left with her family. A tear dropped on the mark for Kilauea. She brushed it away and tucked the pillowcase and package near the bottom of the backpack.

A knock at the open door startled her. "Ready to go?" Alex stood, half framed in the door.

How long had he been watching her? She gulped. He treated her well at least, far better than Jerry had treated Karen. Other than holding her hand, and holding her near in times of stress, he hadn't pushed his true feelings on her. Enough for her to know they were there. "A minute." Amber tucked the blanket on her bed. Not that it mattered, they wouldn't be back. She picked up her backpack and walked to the door.

"Gina's waiting on us in the cafeteria," Alex said.

"Did she rest? I know she had to meet with General Nord, and

that's never a short meeting." Amber pulled the strap tight over her shoulder.

Alex nodded. "It's almost midday." He placed his good hand against the wall.

She took a deep breath. Unusual for him to do that.

"Gina is going to officially invite us to her wedding. She thinks we are a couple, and I didn't respond to that statement earlier. If you don't want to go, or don't want us to go as a couple, you need to clear it up with her when she asks. I didn't want to deny anything, not knowing your feelings." He stared deep in her eyes.

She couldn't respond to that request. Right now, she had lost all the family she had ever known. Even Dr. Rebecca had said goodbye. "We can go as friends, if you want to," Amber said.

Alex relaxed. "Good. Cause I don't think we have a choice, since one of the stops is her family's ranch so she can be married. I think many people are afraid right now, and rushing into things. No need for us to as well." He touched her shoulder, and then opened the cafeteria door.

A few hours later, they arrived at the Santa Fe landfill. A manager came out to meet them at the helicopter. "Before you start, I'll need to ask questions."

"I'll try to answer them," Amber said. "I'm not well versed on biochemistry."

The man put his hand to his head. "Do we know any after affects?"

"You'd have to ask other scientists," Amber said.

"What about holes in the landfills, will they cause collapses over time as they eat the plastic?"

Amber closed her eyes. The consequences, intended and unintended were unknown to her, and from what many had said, the biochemists. "I don't have the answers. Gina can give you the contact information of the scientists. According to General Nord's request, we are to find a pile of plastic, and release a tablespoon of the bacteria solution. That's all I know."

She shouldered her bag and walked past the man. He was doing his job, as she was doing hers. Her throat tightened. Amber kept moving. A stack of plastic crates was piled at the entrance to one of the garbage pits. The container in her hand held several doses of plastic eating bacteria.

A few drops, and the first batch would begin to work. How long it would take, she didn't know.

"Let's unbury some over there," Alex said. "We can then rebury it, and maybe it will work faster."

"I don't want to dig in garbage," Amber said.

"You dig in faults, not much different, is it?" He laughed.

She giggled. "The archeology students once said something like that. They dig in ancient garbage. Modern garbage may be full of germs though, more dangerous to us than this bacteria." The glass tube glistened in the sun.

"There's a stick over there, we have to uncover something." Within moments, he had uncovered part of a plastic storage tub. A perfect candidate.

She dribbled some solution onto it.

Alex covered it back up with loose garbage before the sun could dry it. "Any more here?"

"Let's choose a third batch, further from the entrance." Amber tripped and slid across the dumping grounds of the large city. So much thrown away. Electronics, tattered clothing, and piles of rotting food teetered as wild animals searched through it. Too much damage to the environment. Mother Nature would have to work to repair herself after the devastation stopped. Or, maybe that was what she was doing. Preparing to recover her life.

They tramped through the garbage, scattered rats, mice, and gulls. A few stray dogs ran past her carrying bones with meat still clinging to them. She stepped on one bag, thinking it was sturdy, as it looked full. Her feet slipped, and her bottom landed on wet cardboard box. What is was wet from, she didn't want to think about.

Alex offered his hand to help her up.

In such an awkward position, it would be cruel to Alex to not accept his help. She reached out, and let him pull her up. Her hand stayed in his. They would either both remain upright together, or both fall. His broken arm still bothered him at times. He might need the help as much, or more than her.

With a third batch of plastic eating bacteria released, Amber and Alex turned back to Gina at the helicopter.

"Where are going now?" Amber tromped through the garbage.

"Not sure. Looks like the manager is still arguing with Gina." Alex point to the red-faced man gesturing at the helicopter.

Amber wanted to run to Gina. The landfill was too unsteady. As wobbly as a fault line during a quake.

Chapter 6

Santa Fe Landfill to Longdale, Oklahoma

Alex struggled with his emotions. He wanted to pull Amber close and protect her from her fear of losing everyone she knew. After all, he was feeling the same thing. Seeing Tom take charge of Karen hadn't been any easier on him than Amber. She was taking it painfully, and rejecting those around her reaching out to her. He'd seen his dad do the same after his mom died.

In time, he hoped to see her smile again. If she didn't push him too far away, he'd do nearly anything to see that smile light up her face. No young woman, barely eighteen, deserved the trauma of the last few months. She took it so much to heart.

The tumble in the landfill had been a hopeful turning point. Almost afraid of the rejection, he reached out anyway. With his eyes closed, he felt her hand take his. At least she'd accepted his help when she needed it, for a moment anyway.

Gina hurried them back onto the helicopter. "He said the ground here was too unsteady for you two to go far. Amber you okay after that tumble?"

"I'm okay," Amber said.

Her voice didn't sound so sure. It was weak, and she had let go of his hand the moment they reached sturdy ground.

"We'll be stopping for fuel, if we can find any. You can clean up then. Food and fuel rations, even on military expeditions now. I don't want to walk the rest of the way home. I will, if I have to. I have to know my family is safe. And I'm sure everyone else feels the same way." Gina turned on the helicopter.

If only Amber had a friend she trusted here. If Livia hadn't disappeared with Corbo, she might have been able to tease or prompt Amber into better spirits. Where were they anyway?

Alex didn't reach out. He placed his hand on the seat between them, palm up, in hopes she would at least speak through the headphones. Of course, Gina would hear anything she said.

Amber closed her eyes as they flew on across New Mexico to Oklahoma.

"I think we're over Texas now," Alex said.

She glanced up. "Sorry. I thought my mom would be around a few more decades anyway. She'll miss so much of my life. I know it's selfish, as everyone is going through the same thing."

"You have a few friends left to reach out to. Perhaps we can find Livia and Corbo. They know this region far more than we do."

A smiled played at the corner of her lip. "I think they have their own worries now. I need to grieve a bit."

"And so do I," Alex said. The thought of what his dad was doing left a deep dread in the pit of his stomach. In fact, there was a far better chance of Amber seeing her mom again, than him seeing his dad.

Amber kicked the box beside her.

He sighed. If only she'd be more open.

"I've checked two places. We have to stop for fuel at the next one. No options." Gina turned to Alex. "I'm worried. The refineries have been offline for over a month now. No fuel is coming into the country. My job won't exist without it."

Gina touched down on the platform. "Don't go far. They are bringing us food. I'll show you good home cooking soon."

Alex and Amber stepped down to the pavement beside the helicopter. His legs wobbled from the vibrations. Even his arm ached from it. He rubbed it. Arthritis would set in at some point, and he'd be able to predict the weather. That might be valued in a future without weathercasters.

"Where you off to?" The man in charge of refueling glanced at her.

"Do you need to know?" Gina asked.

"Strict rations require only the maximum fuel to reach a destination."

Gina's eyes closed. She gave the location and turned to the building to take a restroom break.

"Come on," Alex said. "We don't have much time."

"About fifteen minutes." The refueler glanced back. "Take as long as you need."

As soon as Alex was back outside, he pulled out his phone. Livia's number was there in the memory somewhere, if the last battery drain didn't erase it. He scrolled through, and found it.

His phone showed no bars of connectivity. Perhaps a text would come through. It had to be quick. Amber and Gina were talking on the other side of the door.

"Livia, it's Alex. Where are you?" He tapped his foot and waited.

Even if it went through now, it might be hours, or days, before she read it.

Amber and Gina walked out the door.

"Any news?" Alex asked.

Amber's eyes were big, and her face pink. What had happened now?

"The President was on a plane, and it didn't land when expected. General Nord is concerned. Only a few leaders know."

"Does anyone know where he was?"

Gina nodded. "Of course, I can't give an exact location. You will have to go for a debriefing so you can determine the extent of geological damage. Or, they may keep us here, so you can have radio contact. I have to wait until he calls back. Until then, we might as well go to the cafeteria."

Alex didn't even notice the food plopped on his plate. He shoved it into his mouth, waiting to see if Livia would return his text, or General Nord would call Gina.

His phone buzzed. As he flipped the cover off, Tom's name flashed on the screen. "Reached Hawaii. You wouldn't want to see it. Karen is safe. As is your dad. Take care."

"At least Karen's safe," Alex said.

"Did they make it?" Amber asked.

"Yes. Guess they still have to put out the bacteria," Alex said.

"When do you leave?" Alex replied.

The next message buzzed. "Hopefully in the morning."

"It's a start," Alex said. "I hoped to hear from Livia."

They finished eating in silence and walked out to sit beside the building. Not being able to leave until to General Nord contacted them would be a problem. Few words were spoken. Early morning flowed into midday.

Finally, Gina's phone rang. She took the call and walked around the building where they couldn't hear what she said. When she came back she waved to them. "Come on, we are going on to my family farm."

"Any news?" Alex asked.

"No. General Nord said it wouldn't do any good to wait any longer. He's checking with Dr. Rebecca and Champ. They may go to the location before they go to the New Madrid fault."

"What are the current stats?" Amber asked.

"I wish I knew," Gina said. "Although, I probably wouldn't understand them if he had told me what they were."

"May I call Dr. Rebecca?" Amber asked.

Gina smiled. "Go ahead. It won't take much time."

Amber pulled out her phone and walked around the building.

Now whether she was really calling Dr. Rebecca, or calling Karen, Alex couldn't be sure. Of course she might call them both.

With a lighter step, Amber walked back around the building.

"Dr. Rebecca thinks that is not going to be easy. We better accept living without fuel, and soon, no electricity," Amber said. "We better hurry if we want to reach your family's farm before there's any more problems."

Gina dashed to the helicopter. They settled in their seats, and she turned the helicopter on. Within moments, they were flying high above the base and on toward Oklahoma.

"What you said Amber, and what General Nord said, I think we'll be staying at my family's farm. I am sorry. I don't dare risk being in the air any further."

Alex was afraid to ask what Gina feared. Whether it was running out of fuel, a part breaking, or something scarier, he didn't want to know.

The sky turned ominous.

"Turbulence ahead." Gina shouted. "We have to hope they gave us enough fuel."

Dark clouds swirled in front of them.

"No way," Gina said. "I'm landing. Better to have to walk than to fall from the sky. No one could find us. There's no fuel for ambulances, if any hospitals are still open."

Gina sat the helicopter down in a mostly empty field and turned it off. "There's a barn over there. Think it's structurally sound?"

Alex glanced at Amber. "What do you think?"

"If that dark cloud forms a tornado, I don't want to be picked up and tossed like a piece of litter. Maybe we can find loose boards to hide under. Let's go." Amber grabbed her backpack and ran for the shelter, as tumbled down as it looked.

Alex and Gina followed. If they could reach the shelter before the storm racing in the same direction, they might be able to be safe. From his vantage, the barn seemed to tilt at an odd angle. The foundation might not be solid, as if anything was these days.

Amber reached the barn ahead of them. She jerked the door open. It fell off its hinges, and almost hit her on the head.

The ramshackle building could tumble with a good stiff wind. Grass blew almost flat at his feet, as the strong winded cloud raced

toward them. "Let's grab the door. If we pull it under the brush over there, it should protect us some," Alex said.

In a few moments, they had pulled the door under the brush and created a protected pocket of air. The door was springy enough that if any pieces from the barn flew their way, they should be safe, unless the whole building sat down on top of them.

The wind howled.

Alex pushed Amber to the center, and took the outer edge, holding it close.

Chapter 7

Corbo's family

Livia leafed through the album her mother had given of the restaurant in better years. A few pictures from last year showed Josie and Nathan in their car by the front window. Neon signs gleamed behind them. Without electricity, there would be no more glimmer, or even photos to share with the future.

A life without the basics of the civilization she had come to expect had been what she, Josie, and Nathan, had fought against. They had helped so many illegal, and legal immigrants, to visit families, and catch a taste of the modern life, while a step away from the past. She'd had to learn a lot about their way of life to help them bridge the gap between cultures. It had made her want to stay in the modern world more than join their world. The outdoor couch, that had felt comfortable after the long ride in the tiny solar car, now hurt no matter which way Livia moved.

The heat was as rancid as the deer meat Desi had brought them and tried to dry in the sun. For years, she had spent many summer days outside, with what had then seemed like little food and water. The silence among the five adults, lack of food, and the well running dry meant they would all have to leave soon, if it wasn't too late.

"Does your phone work?" Corbo asked.

"Not enough battery left. I checked yesterday." Livia picked up her crutches and hobbled over to the table where the deer strips dried in the sun. Her phone was one more thing she missed. No contact with her dead friends, or her parents.

"I've always used the dehydrator. I wish I knew how to do them right in the sun. Such a waste of excellent meat. You're a good cook." Desi patted her on the shoulder and shook his head at the spoiling meat. "Guess we should have fed the travelers."

"We'll find more food soon. Corbo can help. The garden is mostly dried up. I know a few emergency food sources."

"No. I'm going to help my parents to the last group of evacuees in the morning. Then I'm off to find my brothers in Arizona. You and Corbo coming?"

"I thought all the evacuees were gone already." Livia pulled on

one strip of deer meat that wasn't as rancid as the others. With a few dried up vegetables, she could make a thin stew.

"Not all of them are gone. Early this morning I walked into town. A poster said the last designated trip will leave at 8:00 AM." Desi pulled off a piece of rotting stinky meat and threw it to a cat. "Figure once I put them on the bus I can find my brothers."

"The little cart we have won't go far," Livia said. "I think it's only meant for one person."

Desi laughed. "Probably. I'll see what I can find in town."

Corbo walked into the clearing with two water buckets in hand. "At this rate, I'm going to need one of those old fashioned shoulder yokes to take some of the strain off my back and arms."

Desi clapped him on the back. "No antique one will fit you. Someone somewhere has to know how to make them strong. One of those weak bamboo painted ones wouldn't hold a drop of water for any distance."

Livia laughed as she cut up the vegetables and dropped them in the pot. So much old technology they now depended on. Most had been forgotten, long ago. Those who still knew how would survive. If the planet didn't settle down soon, modern technology might be gone as well. Secrets to the making of many modern tools where held by only one or two people. If those people died, there might not be access to their records, or written instructions to relearn how to create modern tools.

She hobbled around the table in the outdoor cooking area. It seemed her ankle had no intention of recovering. The pain wouldn't stop her, even if it did slow her down. Her parents would be missed, even though they rarely noticed her. In the days without electricity, she had talked more with her mom, than all the years of her life put together. They didn't need her. Corbo did need her.

Corbo depended on her to get better so they could continue to search for his father. His Aunt Anna and Uncle Jon had said almost nothing. It seemed they had no intention of giving him the information he needed to search. Aunt Anna's long face and lack of easy flowing English meant no matter where she went, people wouldn't quite trust her. Uncle Jon's leg wasn't healing. In normal times, Livia would have called and asked for transportation back to the Immi Clinic. Now, there was likely no one there either.

Desi had grown impatient with his parents. He glared at them when he even sat in the circle. With no way to hear from his brothers, there was no way of knowing exactly where they'd gone.

They might have even been forcibly evacuated if the military caught them on the roads.

Silence hung over them heavier than the haze at mid-afternoon. The feeling of hope when they had arrived had given way to a deep drowning despair. Livia had grown tired of trying to break the silence. It was too much to ask them to speak. No one wanted to. Perhaps leaving would be the best thing. Though where they would go, she didn't know.

Morning dawned with light dew sprinkled across the ground. Livia sat up on the couch and looked around.

No sign of Corbo.

Her feet touched the ground, and she pulled herself up onto her crutches. The ankle ached in the early morning dampness and chill. If Amber were here, she'd know what to do. Even Josie knew more than she did about wrapping ankles. It was time she learned how to do it on her own, and not to depend on others.

She hobbled around the house to the solar vehicle.

Boxes and bags were stacked around the front of the vehicle.

"Hi." Corbo stepped out the door of the large broken down house. "There isn't much left in there. We found more food."

"Enough for breakfast?" Aunt Anna waited on the broken porch.

"Sure. Desi and I agree. Livia and Uncle Jon will ride in the cart. Aunt Anna will drive, and we will walk behind."

"I've never drove before. And I don't have a license," Aunt Anna said.

"You are the only one who can," Desi said. "They can't walk that far, and we weigh too much to drive and expect the solar power to get them into town."

Aunt Anna waved her hand at the mess of boxes. "You can't take all of our employer's belongings."

Desi laughed. "There's less here than you think. A little food. Some curtains and clothes. They'll be currency until they rot away." He dropped a bag beside his mother.

"We'll sort and carry what we can." He pawed through the bag and handed some beef jerky around. "Corbo, go bring your uncle around and settle him in the back seat. We'll pack what we can on top of him."

Before long, the vehicle was packed. Corbo and Desi were weighed down with bags of old clothes.

Livia closed the door as Aunt Anna turned the key at Corbo's direction.

The vehicle jerked and jolted forward.

"Don't use the pedal too much. We need to keep up," Desi said.

At least it was only a mile into town. Livia gripped the rails until her knuckles turned white.

Aunt Anna steered down the middle of the three-lane road. Ignoring the speed limit signs, she barely reached twenty miles an hour.

"Turn left at the stop sign," Desi yelled. "We are meeting them at Indra's store."

The vehicle slowed to a crawl.

"Give some gas," Corbo said.

"Pedal's pushed all the way down," Aunt Anna said.

"Don't slow for the stop sign then," Corbo said.

They rounded the corner and coasted to a stop.

Desi caught up with them. "Almost there. I'll leave my pack here, and go meet them. They should come this far out of the way."

"Take your pack, or they won't believe you," Corbo said.

Desi dropped his pack. "On second thought, I'll stay and help empty everyone out. You go meet them Corbo, you've had more experience with the military people."

"I can go with you." Livia pulled herself to her feet on her crutches.

"Wait here," Corbo said. "They might need you. I'll be back."

Her heart beat wildly as he walked down the dust covered road away from her. She grasped the doorframe. Staying with his aunt, uncle, and feuding Desi would be a tension filled time until his return.

Desi lifted Uncle Jon out of the vehicle and sat him in the shade of a nearby building.

Livia grabbed the bags she could carry and hobbled over beside them. A few bottles of water had been hid inside one. She handed them out as they waited. "You aren't hiding too, are you?"

With a shake of his head, Desi drank a few sips of water. "Trying to help Corbo. And I want to say goodbye."

"Should I go away?"

"No need. Mom, I don't know the truth. I guess none of us do. And I really don't care anymore. I hope you find my sisters and they can take care of you."

A screech of tires rounded the building. An old broken school bus slid into view. Windows down. Sullen faces peeked out at them. Breaks squealed as the vehicle stopped beside them.

Corbo walked around the front and with Desi's help, helped Uncle Jon up the steps and to a seat near the front. Aunt Anna, with tears rolling down her cheeks, followed. Desi ran back and carried the few remaining bags, to toss on top of the vehicle and strap them down.

"You going too?" The driver asked.

"Desi said he was going to find us a vehicle to make it back to General Nord," Livia said.

The man nodded. "A scout will be through in about a half hour."

"Please forgive me," Aunt Anna wailed.

"We do," Corbo said. "No go, and be safe."

Corbo and Desi walked back to Livia, and placed their arms around her shoulders, supporting her.

When the bus pulled away, she slumped to the ground. This was worse than watching her parents leave. This time she had seen the faces of others, some she, Josie, and Nathan had helped in years past. The beaten last remnants of unwanted immigrants who hoped for a future somewhere.

Chapter 8

Indra's shop near Corbo's family Los Alamos, New Mexico

The bus pulled away slowly, and with a bang. Maybe it was engine trouble. Corbo sat down. The people he had known as his parents were gone from his life, likely forever. If the bus made it to the evacuation camps, they would never return.

"I'm going for a walk before the scout arrives," Desi said.

"Do you want us to wait on you?" Corbo shifted his pack to provide shade as the sun continued its ascent.

"I may find them first. I won't be long." Desi stalked off down the dusty street.

"Do you think they will send us back to General Nord?" Livia asked.

He reached over and grasped her hand. Though she hadn't shown much pain, the ankle wasn't healing like it should. With no painkillers to keep inflammation down, and lack of food, it was no wonder. Perhaps, a few days at the base would be best for her recovery. It would mean more time from away finding his dad. If his dad hadn't evacuated. "Do you want to go back to the base?"

She shook her head. "We'd never have permission to leave. I'd rather go before the scouts arrive if we can."

Glass shattered somewhere a few streets over. A mangy pair of dogs raced down the road in front of them. Clouds of dust hung in their wake in the early morning sunshine.

Corbo reached into his pack and pulled out his gun. He only had a few bullets, so he had to aim carefully if a raider attacked them.

Livia backed up to lean against the cool adobe brick building. She couldn't run anywhere.

Silence and sunshine were all he could see.

Desi, with a jaunty smile on his face, sauntered around the corner of the building carrying a box and a bag. When he reached them, he sat the box and bag down. "I broke into the gun store. The owners didn't leave much. Will these fit your gun?" He held out a box of cartridges.

Corbo took them. "Yes they will. Breaking and entering, even

now is still illegal. I don't think I can keep them." He turned the box around. Illegal, definitely. A boon for their safety, if no one knew, until the bullets ran out.

"Ask the scouts when they arrive. I'll see you later."

"What. Aren't you going with us?" Corbo said.

Desi picked up his pack and the bag from the gun store. "I'm going south to Mexico to search for mom's family. Stay safe. I'll find you."

"I thought you were going to find Inno and Miggy."

"I am. They went south to find the address the letters to mom's family always go. You go north, and we'll meet in Arizona. I'll find you somehow. It'll be a long trip."

Something rumbled a few streets over.

"I have a horse waiting. Go." Desi ran off between the buildings.

Coro helped Livia up. It would be a long ride for Desi, and finding him again didn't seem likely. He pushed the box deep into his bag and held the gun steady.

Two military scout vehicles rounded a corner and screeched to a stop before them.

A woman stepped out and showed her identification. "You must be Corbo and Livia."

"Yes we are," Corbo said.

"Did you find your family?"

"We found my aunt and uncle. They left on the last transport. We need to go to Arizona to look for my dad."

"Solar vehicle not doing well?"

He shook his head.

"Ride with us. We'll take you see General Nord. Good food and new bandages for Livia will go a long way."

Livia pulled back. "Climbing isn't easy right now."

"I'll lift you," Corbo said.

The ride to the base was as long as the one after Livia's protester friends had attacked Dr. Rebecca's van many months ago. The dry cracked road spread out in front of them. The driver and other soldiers didn't say a word. Not that there was much to be said.

Upon arrival at the base the driver turned in and pulled up in front of a building they recognized.

Corbo helped Livia out, and steadied her on the ground.

"I can manage." Livia hobbled to the door.

Corbo grabbed their backpacks and followed. As stubborn as ever. Even a twisted ankle hadn't changed her. He'd better get used

to it if he needed her help. Whenever he met authorities, they always startled him into silence. He'd have to depend on her for speech, as much as she had to depend on him for carrying their backpacks.

Chilled air flowed out of the door he held open. It would almost be a relief to be inside. Somehow the base had electricity. Livia's crutches clicked down the hallway.

The driver pointed to a room to the right.

Corbo followed Livia inside. A makeshift cafeteria had been set up in what had been a uniform storage room. General Nord sat at the table nearest the door.

He looked up from his paperwork and dropped his pen. "Livia, Corbo, come join me." He turned to the soldier beside him. "Bring food trays for them."

Corbo pulled out a chair and pushed their backpacks under the table. "Sir, Livia's leg isn't healing. We need to go on."

General Nord leaned back in his chair. "You helped your aunt and uncle?"

"They left on the last transport."

The soldier returned with two trays of food.

"Eat. I'll be back in a few minutes." General Nord stood up and walked to the door. Before going through, he returned for his pen.

Corbo glanced at Livia and dug into the meat and vegetables. At least there was no fear of them being rancid.

The first soldier left and returned a few minutes later with another soldier.

"Hi, I'm the only nurse on base. Let me look at your ankle," she said.

Livia turned in her chair, and the woman took her leg gently in her lap. An almost groan escaped as the woman touched the anklebone under the wrap.

"There's a lot of swelling," the woman said.

Livia's face was red. She nodded.

"Let me show you how to wrap the bandage better."

The woman started working with Livia.

Corbo pushed his tray aside and stood up. He could learn how to help her adjust the bandages. Should have thought of it sooner.

The door opened slowly. "Corbo will you come with me for a moment?" General Nord said.

"I'll leave our backpacks." Corbo followed behind General Nord.

They went into small office. "Sorry for the lack of space. I'm

giving you some papers that may help you find your father. I will need you to contact me if you see any fault or volcano activity." General Nord held the pages out of reach.

"I don't know as much as Amber and Alex. And how can I let you know if no cell phone towers have power?"

"The truck I'm giving you has a radio. It'll reach me, or other relay stations. Will you do it?"

Corbo nodded. He really had no choice.

General Nord pointed to the map. "Follow these roads as best you can. Stay safe, we need you both, as well as Amber and Alex."

"Sir, you trust us?"

He nodded. "You'd go without my help. So, I'm providing my personal vehicle, fuel, and food. Not sure how far you'll get."

Corbo took the pages from his out stretched hands.

"One more thing." The general's face was more lined with care than he had ever seen.

"Yes sir?"

"Stop at this point and inform my wife I won't be home for dinner." The general pointed to a spot on the map.

Corbo looked down at the pages in his hand. On top was an enclosed envelope labeled "Varanda Nord." He nodded and ran back to Livia.

Chapter 9

Longdale, Oklahoma

Amber slid under the door next to Alex. There wasn't much room, and the barn didn't look safe enough to have stayed in. Gina crawled underneath beside her. They'd all be wet for sure.

Rain pelted down and bounced back up striking them all over. Strong winds tried to rip the board out of their hands. The boulder they had wedged it under behind them rolled off and it flipped up at that end too.

They could no longer see the barn a few hundred feet away. The helicopter was long out of sight. Eerily, the lighting changed from black to green. The rain slowed and a cloud whisked down to the ground almost out of sight, and raced toward them. The funnel stretched across the landscape, hopping about, and dropping bits of lumber and debris. Before reaching the helicopter, it jumped upward, with enough downdraft to flip the copter onto its side.

Gina gasped. "My livelihood!"

Our lives. Amber grasped the edge of the door closer. Almost no food, no water, and no idea where they were, could they survive to meet the goals General Nord had asked them to complete? They'd have to figure out a way, somehow.

The funnel advanced on their hiding place. Amber wiggled closer to Alex to help him hold the door as the winds threatened to rip it away. The tornado grabbed bits of the barn as it approached. Walls disappeared into the cloud as it scattered debris behind it. It moved on to the west, and slipped back up into the sky.

Blue sky crowded out the darkened clouds that had taken their only transportation from them in this barren wasteland that had once been a farmer's livestock fields.

Alex lifted the door off of them.

Soaking wet, and muddy, they were safe for the moment. Small animals came out of hiding and scampered away to the scattered remains of the barn.

"If my phone works, I'm calling General Nord." Gina wiped a tear from her eye. "We'll make it somehow."

"I thought I saw a kitten, I'm going to check on it," Alex said.

Amber followed. She didn't want to hear General Nord's side of the conversation. He'd either be loud and angry, or silent and sullen. She pulled out her phone and looked at it. With no idea when or where they'd have a chance to charge them up again, they'd better take turns using their phones.

Alex petted the scared tabby kitten he had found. Other than a little missing fur, and a bottlebrush tail, it looked fine.

"Amber, Alex, guess what?" Gina shouted as she ran toward them waving her phone.

"What?" Amber adjusted her backpack.

"General Nord said we aren't far from where Windy is. She has horses; and will bring them to us. We have to hike to the town of Longdale, about three miles back northwest of here. At least the helicopter didn't break up. We can recover some of the gear, and navigation tools."

Gina raced off to the helicopter.

Amber didn't mind letting her run ahead. Windy had horses, and was on her way here. Amazing. If only she could have saved Fortune. The memory of the dammed rolling Rio Grande, with animals trying to escape both it and the Jornada del Muerto volcano, dimmed her eyes to the here and now.

Alex touched her shoulder. "I'm going to try to save the kitten. I'll ask Gina if she has an empty bag we can carry it in. It's scared."

Amber picked the young tabby cat up. Not Taffy, that's for sure. In fact, no one knew if Taffy, or her kittens, survived. The kitten purred and licked the tip of her nose. It reached up with both paws to hug her face. There was a wet spot on Amber's cheek that she couldn't decide if it was from the kitten's licks, or a tear. No time for tears.

She cuddled the cat close and followed Alex to the helicopter. A three-mile walk across a land none of them knew with a scared kitten. And then, they'd have to find a place to leave the kitten. It couldn't travel on horseback.

Gina stepped out of the helicopter remains bubbling. "Whatever you name the kitty, I'll keep her. We will need as many barn cats as we can find in the coming days. Here is my future sister-in-law's gift bag. It should hold the kitten."

Gina held out a canvas bag with a mesh top.

Amber opened it and sat the purring kitten inside. It curled up into a ball as she rubbed its head.

Alex lifted the bag. "I'll carry the kitten."

Gina pulled out a backpack and loaded it with assorted pieces she had tossed on the ground. "We can't expect to come back for it. Alex, can you look ahead for a small stream of safe drinking water?"

Amber and Alex trudged ahead of Gina. The kitten slept quietly in the bag. Short grass made walking easier, and dead animals more visible. One was a skeletal cow that may have been dead before the storm. "I imagine she has to bring something we aren't supposed to see," Alex said.

"Like the black box?" Amber asked.

"Like something pertinent to her real mission after her wedding. We don't know what that really is."

"She won't be able to complete it now. I hope we can complete ours."

"We will. I think we will hear from your mom and Brandon. With Karen and Tom going to Yellowstone with dad, I hope we can maintain contact," Alex said.

"I'd be happy to be able to talk to mom and Karen again. I even miss Brandon." No sign of water anywhere.

Buildings rose in the distance.

The kitten meowed.

Alex stopped and opened the bag to check on it. "I think it's hungry."

Amber reached in and petted the cat. "I don't even know how to tell if it's a boy cat, or a girl cat. Karen would know."

Alex sat the red box on the ground. "I only know it's a female if it has babies, though I've seen videos of kittens snuggling up to males too."

The helicopter was out of sight. They sat and rested under an almost leafless tree and waited on Gina. The kitten played in Amber's lap, chasing a bug up and down her legs.

Gina appeared over the ridge carrying a heavy backpack. "It's not much further. Are you both tired?"

"Checking on the kitten," Amber said. "We can go on now."

Gina petted the purring feline. "I think it's a girl. I'll check later, when we make it home."

Home. The memory of home brought tears to Amber's eyes. It probably didn't exist anymore. Everything there was gone, abandoned, even by Karen.

She struggled along behind Gina and Alex. No one spoke, and even the kitten was silent.

"We're supposed to look for the Post Office," Gina said.

They crossed two streets, and saw the sign in the distance. Under the sign was the now familiar trailer, with a few extra dings in the paint and metal.

Amber ran for the trailer. She dropped her backpack and peeked in through the open rails.

Squealing with delight, she ran to open the back door.

Fortune trotted out and leaned her head against Amber's shoulder.

Burying her head in Fortune's mane, Amber let out all the tears she dared for her missing mom. One good friend who asked for nothing more than food, water, and companionship. She wiped her eyes and glanced up into Windy's shinning eyes.

"I know she'll have good home with you," Windy said.

Chapter 10

Longdale Oklahoma to Oklahoma Landfill

Alex's eyes misted when Amber opened the back door of the trailer and Fortune trotted out. The horse meant so much to Amber. Horses would be their only source of transportation now, and in the near future, at least until the refineries could restart.

Even if Mother Nature stopped shaking in her sleep, it would take months, or even years, before production of fuel would make vehicle travel realistic again. If it happened even then. Many secrets of production were held by only one person at the head of corporations. If that person died, or any number of links along the chain had died, production of that item might never occur again. For vehicular travel, there was raw fuel recovery, useful product production, fuel transportation, vehicle design, and raw materials that couldn't reach the manufactures in companies to build parts all over the world.

"Your horse is here too," Windy said. "I'm to pick up fuel here and go on to New Madrid to meet Dr. Rebecca. Where are you going?"

Alex reached for the mane of the horse he had ridden before. He recognized him at least. Well fed, and ready to go, full of energy and spirit. The first time he had seen the horse, it was barely alive, a dirty skeleton, with no spirit. He looked so different than Amber's horse. Though of course, Fortune would show her temper when she wanted to.

"We are going to stop at the Oklahoma City landfill and drop off some bacteria." Alex held up the red box for Windy to see.

She nodded. "Be careful out there. There'll be people and wild animals looking for food, fuel, and whatever they can find."

"They wouldn't search in a dump, would they?" Amber rubbed Fortune's neck.

"Sure would. It'll be easy, as no one can stop them. No stores are open anywhere. Where else will they go?"

"I wouldn't want to eat out of a dump," Amber said.

"Most won't, they'll find fuel to burn to keep warm." Windy petted the kitten as it romped up onto the trailer.

Before long, they left for the close to one hundred mile journey to Gina's home. Amber remained distant, lost deep in thought, and only spoke when spoken too. Her pain must have been deep, and Alex couldn't reach it. Pushing her wouldn't help. Being nearby, steady, and ready when she needed him was all he could do.

After two days of travel, they reached the Oklahoma City landfill. As Windy predicted, it was crawling with dogs, birds, rats, and people. Children ran, slipped, and slid through the mounds of garbage. Adults waited on the sides, guarding piles that had been brought to them.

"Where can we go to?" Gina asked.

"Let's ride around to the other side," Alex said. "There has to be an open place somewhere."

Birds that looked like they belonged on the sea, and not this far inland, fluttered in and out among the people and dogs screeching at the tops of their lungs.

They rode around the sea of garbage and fluttering wings and cloth. Children in little better than rags, ran by the horses, and tried to grab their manes and tails.

Amber strode ahead, her head held high. "I think I see an opening."

"Let's go back, it's almost dark," Alex said.

"We need to finish today, so we can go on," Amber said.

"He's right," Gina said.

Amber reluctantly turned Fortune away. "I want to be done here. It looks so forlorn and lost."

"I have a plan," Alex said.

They rode beyond the sound of the active garbage mine.

"What's your plan?" Amber said.

"If we try to release it now, someone will take the plastic we release it on, and it won't help. We have to wait until after nightfall and go back," Alex said.

"Or," Gina said. "Rest and eat. There's another landfill south of here. We can be there about midnight."

"Good idea," Alex said.

Perhaps instead of a major landfill, they should find an illegal dump where no one was looking for food or fuel.

Midnight, and the moon was barely a sliver of light. He led the horses down the pathway, avoiding the road as much as possible. They would have to sneak in, do their job, and sneak out. He'd leave Amber and Gina in a safe place to wait, if he could find one.

The miles through town had led through many people with shifty eyes and bodies, watching the horses they rode, as if the horses would be their next meal if the riders left them alone a minute. They had even eaten huddled on the horses as raggedy children ran in circles at the stamping horse's feet.

Even now, in the dark, eyes gleamed as they rode by. It was if all the local people no longer lived in their homes. Perhaps the people were afraid of a structure failure, or the homes were stifling without their accustomed air conditioning. A once snug home, would become a death trap if, like many modern buildings, the windows couldn't be opened.

A truck blocked the path to the landfill entrance. A man in uniform sat with a rifle guarding the treasures buried deep within.

Alex took a deep breath. Somehow, they had to get beyond the gate and do their job.

Gina rode up beside him. "Let me try."

The man pointed his gun at Gina as she rode closer.

Her military uniform glinted in the moonlight. She pulled out her identification and showed it to the man. After a whispered conversation, she waved back to Amber and Alex.

When they reached her, Gina said, "Tie the horses to the bumper. He has a friend patrolling inside. We'll have to be quick, and follow his lead."

The other guard arrived at the gate and waved them through, locking it fast behind them. "What are you here for?"

Alex quickly explained.

The man closed his eyes a moment and nodded. "How long do you think it takes to work and multiply?"

"No idea," Alex said. "I'd say months most likely."

"Follow me." Their guide led them around the perimeter for at least a half mile. He stopped and pointed at a towering mountain of garbage. "There. There's a ladder where a garbage archeology project was going on. Descend it quickly, drop your samples, and come back up. There are shovels. We'll cover it a few feet deep in a hurry if we can."

Alex sat the kitten's bag down. "Can you watch our tiger?"

The man grinned. "As long as I don't have to open the cage."

Alex took Amber's hand. "We have to hurry. I'll go down."

At the top of the narrow hole was a rickety ladder with a bucket on a rope.

"No way Alex, it'll bury you if your long legs bump the sides. Let

me go down."

"You can't dig your way back out."

"I've had more experience than you at climbing down research ravines. I'll take the bucket with the samples. You can pull me back out," Amber said.

Reluctantly, he agreed. He held the ladder steady as she climbed down. At last, the rope stopped moving. Gina's flashlight bounced around off the towering walls. If he yelled to check on her, the walls might collapse, or worse, bring spectators.

Finally, she began the climb back to the top.

He took her hand and helped her over the last rung of the ladder.

"The air's bad down there, and water." She gasped for air.

"Did you succeed?"

Amber nodded. "Three feet up. Hurry."

He pulled the ladder out of the hole and tossed it to the side.

Gina grabbed two shovels nearby.

They quickly pushed and dug through the loose garbage, filling the hole as fast, and as deep, as they could.

A low murmur in the distance grew.

"Hurry," the guard shouted.

Alex dropped the shovel. Grabbing Amber's hand, they ran to the guard to pick up their bags, including the meowing cat.

They followed the guard back to the gate.

People with firebrands stood outside, far too close to the horses.

Fortune whinnied and pulled at her rope.

Amber ran through the gate toward her.

One man waved his fire stick between her and Fortune.

Fortune pulled loose and kicked him in the head.

The man fell on the ground. Blood pulled around a gaping hole in his head.

"Why did they let you in?"

Flames flickered in the air.

They couldn't tell the truth, and these people would recognize a lie.

"Official business. Had to be sure it is safe. Hazardous materials are buried here, and they can kill you, and all of us if we stay any longer. Toxic fumes are blowing this way right now," Gina said.

Alex hurried to his horse to calm him. Not exactly the truth. Believable enough to the people around them.

The volume lowered as people stared at them. "Is it safe to be here?"

Gina's uniform glistened in the moonlight. "No. It won't be for many generations. Ground water will be affected for miles. Go now, and find a safe place for you, and your families."

"What about our water?"

"It should be safe until mid-morning," Gina said. "I wouldn't trust it beyond that. Go now, so you can leave early."

The crowd grumbled as they turned slowly and walked away in bunches.

The guard who had been with them gave a startled cry when he reached the truck door.

Gina hurried over to the guard. Her face was pale as she ran back to them. "They killed the guard for doing his job. We are going now." She climbed on her horse and galloped toward the south.

Alex groaned as he and Amber raced after her. No place was safe when people were so scared they would kill a person for keeping them from garbage. Hopefully, Gina's home would be safe from looting.

Chapter 11

Los Alamos, New Mexico to Varanda Nord's

Livia groaned as the nurse wrapped her foot. It felt too tight. Her skin pulsed and throbbed against the elastic bandage.

"Here. You take it off, and try to put it back on," the nurse said.

Livia lifted her foot onto a nearby chair and nodded. Figuring this out would help her and Corbo both. It took a few tries to wrap it right, and the throbbing no longer occurred.

Corbo walked back in the room holding papers. "We leave after we finish eating. General Nord gave us an assignment to do before we can find my father. I have to see what these papers say." He sat down at his half-empty tray and shoveled food into his mouth.

"Thank you," Livia said to the nurse.

"Here are a few extra bandages. Wish we could put the ankle in a better cast for you. I don't have the supplies." The nurse smiled at her before she left the room.

"I'll manage." Livia took the bandages and pushed them in her backpack. "What's the extra assignment?"

Corbo looked into her eyes. "A letter to his wife."

If she were even there. "She should have evacuated."

"You didn't, and we aren't even married," Corbo said.

It took a lot of strength to be married to man who wasn't there all the time. General Nord's wife would likely remind her of Amber, full of strength, sure of herself, while kind to others. Not that she had returned the favor, not really. "How far?"

"We should be there by evening, if no problems. Ready?"

Her tray sat unfinished. Somehow, she wasn't hungry. She wouldn't waste the food. Not now. Not like when she was younger, her parents ran the deli, and she could gab anything she wanted, anytime. Livia wrapped the food and shoved it in her backpack. "Let's go."

Corbo stood up and handed her crutches to her.

Someday she would be off them, and able to go where she wished. She followed him down the hall, the constant clicking an annoyance, and a distraction. Soldiers stared as they passed.

It was almost dark when Corbo drove the rattling truck up to the

wooden fence. "This should be the place. I'll open the gate."

Livia covered her eyes. It should have been her job to get out and open the gate. Since she'd have to take the time with the crutches, they'd use far more fuel. And, she wasn't sure she could climb back in on her own.

The door squeaked open and Corbo slid in beside her. A few feet inside the gate, he left to close the gate behind them.

Livia turned her attention to the gravel road in front of her. It stretched as far as she could see. Fences ran down both sides. Cows congregated near some brushy trees in the distance.

"You okay?" Corbo asked on his return.

"I don't want to be a burden to you like I was to my parents."

Corbo touched her hand as the truck started forward. "I don't think your parents thought of you as a burden. Aunt Anna and Uncle Jon I'm sure thought I was burden. A reminder."

Livia glanced at him. Lost in her own misery at not being able to help him, she had poured salt in his raw wounds, and rubbed it in. She closed her eyes a second. Sometimes though, salt helped the wounds heal once the pain was past. Or, so Windy had said. She touched his hand. "We'll find him."

"We have to find Varanda first. Where is the house this road should lead to?" He steered around a curve in the fence.

"There's more brush up there, and I think the house is hidden in it."

The gravel slid between the tallest brush she had seen in miles. Once between the vehicle high trees, an empty dry dirt yard appeared. It was surrounded by an even taller fence. The house behind it was only one story, and a ramp led to the door.

"Looks like she's eager to keep people out," Corbo said. "I'll park. See if you can open it."

Livia slipped out of the truck and walked over to the gate. An old fashioned bell and pulley system was attached. She rang the bell, and the string pulled taunt. An answering bell sounded in the distance. All she could do was wait with her crutches leaned up against the gate.

About to give up and hobble back to the truck, the front door creaked open.

A straggled woman glanced behind her, held up her hand, and quickly closed the door. She strode purposefully across the barren yard. Her hand slipped a loose strand of hair behind her ear as she did so. The woman approached the gate, glanced at the truck, and

leaned her head to one side. "What do you want? I'm not buying anything."

"Are you General Nord's wife Varanda?"

The woman laughed. "No. She is inside right now."

"Corbo has a letter for her. Can you please ask her to come out?" This woman looked as out of place as the immigrants she used to help. Maybe being nice to her wouldn't work.

The woman put her hands on hips. "Not sure she will come out. If she doesn’t, you'll have to leave."

The woman walked back to the door, frequently looking over her shoulder. As she opened it, four shepherd dogs bounded out barking ferociously. They ran for the gate with tails high.

Livia stepped back, and held her hand out, palm down. This signal usually meant stop or down, though some people used it to mean something else.

The dogs barked at her, and didn't try to tear off the gate.

She held her hand closer to the gate, and used her other hand to waft her smell closer to them.

The dogs relaxed, sat down, and watched her. Their tails wagged consistently. A brown shepherd stayed closer to the house, with one ear up and listening.

Dogs hadn't been pets in her home. Even so, she had learned to read their body language some. They weren't as easy to read as scared immigrants, and their moods could change in a second.

The door creaked open again. The brown shepherd barked and ran toward the tiny Mexican woman riding a wheelchair down the ramp. A Mexican married to a general would make life even more difficult. Now, to decide if General Nord didn't want anyone to know about his wife, or if she chose to hide from the world of her own accord, much like Corbo.

The woman reached the fence. "I'm Varanda. Where is Corbo?"

Corbo stepped up behind her. "I have a letter for you. Sorry to be so rude. I have to verify you are who you say you are."

She nodded. "General Nord said you are going to Arizona to search for your father. Now tell me something to verify your identity."

"I didn't know until recently. And Livia broke her ankle."

The woman nodded to the crutches. "So she did. You better come in and stay here tonight." Varanda pulled a set of keys out of lap and unlocked the gate. The dogs bounced around her.

Livia hobbled inside. "Do you have many wild animals or people you have to keep out?"

Varanda took the letter Corbo handed her and set it in her lap. After locking the gate, the keys landed with a thump on the letter. When the woman turned the chair to lead them back to the house she said, "The gate doesn't keep anything out. It keeps my son in."

The tall fence was to keep people in, and not out. What a strange way of doing things. Of course, Varanda couldn't chase a child across open cow pastures.

The brown shepherd nudged the woman's hand.

A young boy, about five, ran out the door waving a branch.

"Olen, you were napping."

He ran around the fence, ignoring them all.

The other woman came out the door. "Sorry. Are they staying?"

Varanda nodded. "Stay with Olen. I'll tell the cook." She rolled in the door with practiced ease.

Livia glanced back the boy, who apparently was pretending his stick was an airplane along the fence line. She pulled the door closed gently and followed Varanda's voice down a long hallway.

Chapter 12

Varanda Nord's New Mexico

He couldn't drive all night, so a rest behind a fence might be the safest choice. The shadows were already long as Corbo followed Livia and Varanda to the house.

When the boy ran out, Corbo stepped back. The child ignored the adults as if they were merely blades of dried summer grass by the watering hole. Could the child know how he felt? Weaving through the lives of others, ignored, and trying to not be seen so he could enjoy the smallest pleasures life had to offer.

Olen flew his stick plane along the fence.

Corbo smiled. His mother would have a tough time raising him, even if she were whole and healthy. In a wheelchair, it would be a whole nother challenge.

They gathered around the kitchen table. A cook prepared the meal, and added more food to pans already on the stove.

Varanda rolled up to the empty place and pulled out the letter.

Corbo turned away and looked around the room. It wasn't much. A long low kitchen, with everything in easy reach. Even Olen could have reached most of it.

"Thank you Corbo. This letter has brought me closure, even if I never see my husband again."

Corbo wiggled in his chair.

"Can you survive here?" Livia asked.

"Oh yes. I'll miss my husband of course. I have a cook, a nanny, and many farm hands and their families here. You'd be welcome to join us if you wanted to stay."

"Only tonight," Livia said. "We have to find Corbo's father."

Varanda placed the letter in a pouch on the side of her chair. "The general spoke highly of you both."

That was a surprise. He always made it seem like helping others was the last thing on his mind. Then again, he had given them his truck. It wouldn't be likely Corbo could return it.

Olen ran into the kitchen and launched into his mother's lap. He sat there and stared at Corbo.

Corbo reached out. "How are you?"

With a grunt, Olen leaned back.

The other woman came in and set the table.

The brown shepherd walked over and nuzzled Olen. Then, he nuzzled against Corbo's hand with a cold, tickly motion before touching Olen's hand.

Olen looked up at Corbo and made a strange sound that Corbo couldn't recognize.

"Don't worry. Olen won't hurt you. He doesn't like change."

"That's why you stayed?" Livia asked.

Varanda nodded. "His older brothers and sisters are working in the refugee camps. I think his favorite sister may come home though. She doesn't like to leave me here."

"He's not happy we came, and won't be happy when we leave, will he?" Corbo said.

Livia waved to Olen, and searched through her backpack. She brought out a stuffed toy bird and handed it him.

"He'll adjust if you only stay one night."

Olen nibbled the feet of the toy bird.

"Food's ready." The cook carried three heavy bowls to the table.

A man came in and took the heavy pans into another room, full of people talking and laughing.

Place settings were simple. Light beige plates on a darker wood table, a napkin, and a spoon. No forks or knives were available. Corbo glanced up at Varanda.

She shook her head and patted Olen's head.

Olen nibbled on the bird's feet until his mother filled his plate.

Corbo took a scoop of potatoes, meatloaf, and beans. He'd eaten with less. Instead of digging in though, he watched the technique Olen used to eat. While he didn't relish eating the meatloaf with his hands, or using the mashed potatoes to paint the table, he decided the meatloaf would make a good solid item to slide the rest of the food against.

After the meal, the nanny took Olen out of the room. He carried the bird by its feet, while the beak bounced on the floor. The brown shepherd followed him.

The cook cleared the table and washed the dishes, including the pans and plates from the other room.

Corbo wanted to say something, though he wasn't sure what. He pulled his backpack closer to him and reached in.

"Wait a bit," Varanda said.

They sat in an uneasy silence until the cook finished the dishes.

Varanda hummed a tune.

Livia rested her head on the table.

"If that'll be all?"

Varanda nodded. "Please close the door behind you."

The cook raised an eyebrow at her boss.

Varanda ignored her.

As soon as the door closed, Varanda turned to Corbo. "I can tell you what you need to know. General Nord believes that your dad has a sibling married to someone on the reservation in southern Arizona. It's a long trek. I came through there myself, many years ago."

"How much do you know?" Livia reached toward her.

Varanda touched her hand and drew back. "Not much. The General found your dad's name, and traced him to his last known place of employment, when he left to find your mother. He hasn't been seen since. If anyone knows anything, it would be the tribe on the reservation."

"They would have evacuated," Corbo said.

"A few may have. Most wouldn't. That's the only home they know. They provide border protection, as well as have an uneasy truce with the military there. Many there help out at the immigrant prisons."

"Dad wouldn't be in prison would he?"

"Technically, no. If procedures were followed correctly. However, if he had your mom, aunt, and uncle's passports, as well as his own, it's difficult to say."

The door opened and a man walked in.

"You will be shown to the guesthouse now. Breakfast will be brought to you in the morning. I won't be out to say goodbye. I hope you can leave before Olen wakes up, so he thinks tonight is a dream. I wish you a safe journey, and hope you find your father. You are welcome back if you want to return."

"Thank you for everything." Corbo picked up his backpack to follow the man out.

He helped Livia up and onto her crutches.

Varanda was a mystery. One moment so nice and friendly, and next as brisk as an August wind. It would be too dark to read the pages General Nord had given them. He'd find time in the morning before they left.

Chapter 13

Elmore City, Oklahoma

Amber and Alex rested in the shade of the brush beside the pond. Humidity hung in the air as almost visible droplets. Four ponds surrounded the ranch, with a large lake to the south.

Goldie panted beside them. Chasing rabbits would have to wait until dusk, after she herded the cattle from one fenced in yard to another.

A wonderful place to be, if only, they had completed their mission for General Nord. Gina's wedding a month ago had been perfect. Until the ground shook, and communication with distant relatives had been lost on the laptops recording the ceremony.

Five days passed before anyone had reached them with news. Gina and her new husband had left a few weeks ago to complete their new sealed mission. The general had also sent an updated mission for Amber and Alex. Now they'd have to finish the rest of the previous mission General Nord had given them, as well as a few new orders.

"Amber!" A small boy yelled from the farmhouse. "Come help."

"Be right there, Danny." It could only mean one thing. Dena was scared again. If only she could find a way to live in peace with herself and her family.

"I'll get the horses ready," Alex said. "Come on, Goldie."

Goldie turned her head at her name.

"Go find Fortune and Crispy." Alex pointed.

"Our packs are ready. See you in a few." Amber kissed his face and ran to the farmhouse.

"I can't!" The frail woman in front of Amber sobbed. "If I am caught doing anything, I'll lose my disability check."

Amber patted her shoulder. "Dena, please. You are the only one who can help. Everyone else is busy."

"The inspectors. I've been warned." Her fists clenched. "I was babysitting one day. An inspector caught me. He told me if I could babysit for two hours, I could hold down an eight-hour job, six days a week."

The woman sobbed so loud everyone on the ranch could hear

her. Amber glanced around, and sure enough, her family had stopped their chores to watch. Heat rose as the summer sun reached toward mid-morning. Dena would have to calm down if she didn't want to have a heat stroke.

Danny, a dirt smeared little boy in overalls, tugged on Dena's sleeve. "Momma, it's okay. We won't tell."

Dena hugged the child close and managed to mumble. "I know dear. I am sorry you have to work, and I can't even help."

Her husband, George stepped up to her. He leaned his hay rake against a wall. "No one is coming. Do what you can. Don't overdo. Please. We need you as much as you need us."

Dena sobbed louder as she collapsed on the ground. "I hate this invisible illness. Some days I can do anything I want. Others." Her hands covered her face as she leaned over on the ground.

Alex reached over and took the woman's hand. "Dena. We need you. Please, help your mother cook meals for your family and friends. Your reputation as a cook has preceded you. Teach Naomi too. No one will know. We will pretend you are supervising from your sick bed if it will help."

She wiped her eyes. "I can do that. I can have my husband bring my easy chair into the kitchen, and collapse in it if I see any investigators peeking through the windows."

Dena strode back to the large ranch house with a spring in her step.

Her husband followed her. "At least she will try," he whispered.

Danny walked up to Amber. "What will we do if they take momma's money away?"

Amber knelt down and held the child close. "Danny, no one will purposely take it away. There isn't any left. Every one of us must find our place in the new world. The quakes changed everything."

She grabbed Danny's shoulders, and leaned him back to peer into his dirty face. Tears smudged his dirty face. "Soon, it won't matter. There aren't any investigators to come. Convince your mom. Learn to live life as it was meant to be lived. In small steps, a bit each day, not overwhelming like the last few decades. We all have a part to share. What will you share with your family and friends?"

Danny wiped his eyes and pulled away. He glanced at his family and their friends. "I wanna be a teacher. I wanna teach others that just cause mom can't work all day doesn't mean she can't care for us. Or do a few little things every day. I wanna teach her to not be afraid anymore." More tears rolled down his cheeks as Gina and

Dena's relatives clapped their hands.

Amber hugged him. "You will. I hope someday you lead your small band of families to be the greatest teachers. To remember where you came from, and where you are going. Keep your hope alive. Here, take this."

Amber reached deep into her pocket and pulled out a data disk. A thumb drive full of information, old maps, and books that might matter someday to the descendants of this child. At least, she hoped it would. The disk was one of the gifts General Nord had given her to share with the communities they visited, in hopes that knowledge would someday once again be readily available to all.

"Please take care of this. Give it your child as a reminder of your past, and your hope for the future."

Two pre-teen girls, Sophie and Vivie, laughed in the background.

She turned to them. "Why do you laugh?"

"Everyone has a thumb drive. There're outdated now, anyway, we use cloud storage." Sophie was the cleanest person there, not a speck of dust on her shirt or shorts. She fanned herself with a paper fan, and glared at the sky.

"Soon the power will be back on. We will all be inside, out of this awful heat." The girl lowered her gaze to Amber, with a smirk on her face.

Power wouldn't be back on, and this girl would have to change her outlook on life.

"Don't count on it. Your ancestors lived without refrigeration. You can too. They didn't use paper fans in the early morning, before the sun rose. Sophie, do you know who your ancestors are?"

"No. And I don't care. They don't matter. Only the here and now matters. My mother is an actress. Vivie will be starring in a movie in a few weeks, once the power's back on. I'm going inside out of this heat." Sophie flounced off and into one of the travel trailers.

The extended family waited and watched. These people listened to what Amber said. They took her seriously, except for Vivie and Sophie, of course. No matter what happened, this group of people would survive.

George returned to the group.

She had to offer some hope to those who depended on her and Alex's scientific knowledge, as well as connections to General Nord. "I know it's difficult right now. We cannot guarantee when, or if, power will be restored. Your bodies will adjust, though it may take a generation or two. We can't unlearn a century's worth of lifestyle in

few short weeks." Amber said.

She stood up and patted Danny on his shoulder. "You grow up and take good care of yourself. You matter. I'm depending on you."

He clasped the data disk in his hand.

"Go put that in a safe place now, you hear?"

He ran into the house, ignoring the dogs barking at his heels.

Amber picked up her backpack, and glanced around the clearing. It had once been a prosperous ranch. Dena's nephew, James had invited all his family and friends for his wedding to Gina.

Within hours of the wedding, a magnitude 8.5 had occurred along the Rio Grande Faults. It had done the unimaginable and bounced back and forth across various fault lines. No power for over a month. Phone towers demolished, leaving no ability to communicate long distance without short wave radios.

Dena's niece had travelled to Fort Sill to find out what was going on. She had sent a message back that everywhere was being evacuated up north. The plains were harvested early. Evacuees would camp in the empty fields.

The rest of the town had evacuated as directed. However, Dena and her family had been given permission to stay, since there wasn't enough fuel for everyone to leave. They would do their best to protect the homes and animals, and be ready to help their neighbors when, and if, they returned.

Amber reached for Alex's arm. "We have to go now. Please take care of yourselves. We will be back. General Nord needs us to help check the faults near another base."

Alex turned to George. "Do you know how to make that kitchen outdoors? Dena can cook outside, where it is cooler. And the house will be cooler too."

"We can sure work something out, even if it is temporary. We will do the best we can." George pointed to a few bushes. "Between them should be good."

"Thank you for the books. They will help. Our ancestors could do it. So can we, once we learn how." Dena's sister said.

"Take care." Echoed though the clearing from several of the people who had visited for the wedding, and now had nowhere to go.

Amber and Alex walked toward the horses.

"Why can't you stay?" A young girl ran after them.

The little girl was a bit younger than Dena's son. Amber squatted down to be at eye level. "Have I helped you and your family?"

She nodded.

"I have to go help other families too. Someday, you will thank me. When you grow up and marry."

She laughed. "I'll marry him." She pointed at the house Danny had entered.

"Perhaps. Perhaps, he might be more of a brother to you by then." Amber hugged her.

Fortune snorted, pulling on the reins at the front gate. She and Crispy didn't have a saddle or packs. A blanket and a bridle were all the control Amber and Alex would have.

Amber hoped they wouldn't miss the next town on her map. It was little more than dot. No one knew if anyone had stayed behind there. General Nord needed to know where people had followed, or disobeyed, evacuation orders.

Chapter 14

Elmore City, Oklahoma to Pernell, Oklahoma

Alex slowed Crispy to watch Amber ride once they were out of sight of the Elmore City ranch. She was beautiful, and had let her hair grow in the last few months.

It would be difficult to find safe water to drink and food to eat. Water had been the cause of the destruction of life as they knew it, through flooding when the Rio Grande rifted, and tsunamis as the quakes rippled around the world. Debris had rushed into once safe water sources. Oil and other contaminants had seeped into groundwater.

Amber gazed in front of her, intent on reaching Pernell by early afternoon. If Amber's earlier predictions occurred, the evacuations were all the more vital.

Pernell was rumored to have cattle on empty ranches without fresh drinking water. Many ranchers and farmers had died, or evacuated to escape the disasters, and abandoned their animals. Cattle would provide food to the remaining communities for years, if cared for properly. A field they passed contained several skeletons of cows picked clean by scavengers.

One skeletal cow still stood, barely. As they rode by, it dropped to its knees. Crows were quick on the attack, pecking at the cow's back. A pack of dogs lounged nearby, waiting, until the cow was on the ground. Mother Nature played out the gruesome scene in front of Alex. The healthiest, humans and animals would survive, allowing the species to continue. The ecological damage done by humans would begin to heal, perhaps in their own lifetime.

The sun silhouetted Amber's face. Her features were hid at the moment; though he knew them well. He closed his eyes a second, remembering the nights they had spent side by side. Somehow, the last quake had brought her back to her normal strong self.

He opened his eyes, and urged Crispy to catch up to Amber and Fortune. They hoped this distance run wouldn't be too hard on him. Alex glanced at the scars along Crispy's legs. They appeared okay, and hadn't reopened.

When they left the second Oklahoma City landfill, someone had

dropped a torch. It startled the horses, and they ran until they could run no further. In morning light, the burns on Crispy's legs oozed a sticky, bloody mess. A two-day walk to Elmore City turned into three, to keep the horse as stable as possible.

"It won't be long. The fences make it a bit more than thirteen miles. Guess we could jump them," Amber said.

"Not with Crispy. Not sure I would if the horse had been trained for it."

She laughed.

Warmth spread threw him at the sound. He wanted nothing more than to take her in his arms and kiss her. In normal times, only a few months ago, he would have waited on her to show signs of interest in him. Even now, he wouldn't push his luck, though, a dropped word now then and wouldn't be too much. He didn't want to die, or have to leave, without her knowing his true feelings.

A half mile down the road, a crater yawned across their path. They steered around it, and followed the road south. A group of buildings clustered close together, beyond a ranch-sized reservoir. Alex tapped Crispy to run ahead of Amber.

He didn't want her reaching it first. Some people who had stayed behind were scared. Soldiers from Fort Sill had reported raiders throughout the countryside. Some were escaped convicts from county jails. Even a federal prison had lost a few prisoners in transport. Hungry animals may have taken over the home and yard. If the owners remained, they might even mistake him and Amber for raiders.

Alex reached the first barn structure. The aroma of hay and animal dung, wafted through the opening. Sunlight filtered in through the doorway, wisps of dust and straw obscured his vision. Gentle mooing and snorting greeted Crispy's footsteps. Alex glanced around in the semi dark. Crispy nickered to the cows. These calm animals had to be well cared for.

Crispy lead the way. His nose would smell friend or foe.

A large cow loomed in the gloom. Not gaunt, or thin. Alex reached out to pat it, and it didn't flinch. It wasn't tied, or in a stall. It was free to roam to the pond for water. Bits of straw and hay were scattered all around. There wasn't much left in the loft above to filter down. These animals would be hungry in a few days.

Crispy side stepped, and rambled in the direction of a whinny in the back of the barn. A shaft of sunlight leaked through a ventilation window, to a place behind an open stall wall. He rounded the stall

door.

A young mother horse stood against the wall, with a baby by her side. The baby teetered as if unstable on its feet. The mother horse eyed Alex. She tossed her head and snorted. The baby toddled forward and almost tumbled into Crispy.

Crispy snorted and stepped back, careful not to step on the baby.

Alex had to help them out of here to safety, if no one was home. No one might ever come back. Perhaps Danny, Dena's son, could take them in. They needed more livestock. Many had been sent north with the evacuees as food for the coming days. These should have gone too, and not been left to starve.

Crispy walked back to the door.

Alex glanced behind him. The baby followed, its mother close behind. Even the cows inched closer, as if expecting Alex to lead them to food. Food for people wasn't easy to find at the moment. Food for animals, even less so. There had been almost no rain and the grass hadn't grown.

Amber waited by the tree next to the large clapboard house. Fortune stood next to her, resting in the shade. Fortune lifted her head as Alex rode out followed by the other animals.

"No sign of people," Amber said. "I did a dust check in their kitchen."

"You shouldn't have gone in without me," Alex said.

"I checked both porches, too much dust. No one's been here for a week at least." Amber patted Fortune's face.

"Did you see any idea of who they were, or where they went?"

"There's mail from before the quake." She handed him an envelope. "It looks as if they took the evacuation orders seriously, and haven't come back. How are the animals?"

"Alive, and surprisingly well."

The baby horse trotted up to Amber. The mother horse nickered as it neared Fortune. Fortune nuzzled it, trying to smell the newborn.

"Is it a baby boy, or girl? And should we take them back to Dena, or on with us?" Alex tried hard not to laugh at the scene of the rambunctious youngster checking out a brand new world.

Amber reached over to pet the baby, and checked its underside. The baby pushed his head into her stomach, causing her to tumble back. "I think it's a boy. Sure has the strength of one for a newborn."

She stood up and dusted herself off. She shook her finger at the baby. "Wild one, back to your mother."

The colt glanced at her, and then trotted off to his mother's side.

Amber swung up on Fortune, as if she were used to it by now. Riding didn't make her near as sore anymore. At least she didn't mention any soreness as she had near the creek that one day.

"We are almost to Pernell now. We have to keep going. Let's see what's there."

A couple of dogs ran around the corner of the house. They followed in behind the cows and horses without growling. The dogs herded the cows, almost as if they knew the animals needed to go to a safer place. The two new horses fell in behind Alex, as the cows gathered in a circle with him and Amber in the center. It was almost comical. The dogs herded the people, cows, and horses toward the road to Pernell.

"You should have seen inside that house." Amber rode so close; her feet brushed his.

"What was so special?" His body tingled as her feet touched his.

Crispy snorted and let Fortune take the lead.

The trail was smooth at this point. Amber twisted around to talk with Alex. "There were two walls. No insulation. The plywood boards had cracks up to one quarter of an inch wide from floor to ceiling, except in the corners. The second inner wall was the same, and it slid on a track."

"A second inner wall? Never heard of that before. The whole wall slid?"

"The walls in each room slid. The width of a board or two is all. Why do you think they did that?" Fortune pulled her head almost free. Amber grabbed the reigns tighter, and rode on ahead.

Maybe Windy would know. If they ever saw her again. "Did Windy say if she was coming back this way?

Amber gazed straight ahead. "Not sure."

Alex gazed over the heads of the cows, trying to see what she saw. The land had changed. The terrain had shifted here as well. No one knew how many new tectonic plates or cratons had been created in the catastrophe. They might re-fuse over time, or like loose clippings, might push and pull, snagging the larger plates as they adjusted.

Amber had shown him a couple of different craton maps. Their jagged edges caused North America to appear to be a giant geological jigsaw puzzle. One intended for a toddler to practice hand coordination. She had even taken one map and cut it up. The cratons had spilt new crustal cracks as they created new mountains,

rivers, and lakes faster than previously recorded in any known civilization.

Scientists who stayed behind to examine changes couldn’t document them as fast as they occurred. Data was obsolete by the time it was uploaded to the few remaining satellites and radio stations with power. At this rate, local change was all that mattered to most people, as the geological and human rifts within the nation widened.

Even though two months had passed since the quakes began, vegetation hadn't re-grown here. No rain had fallen to quench the thirst of the disturbed foliage. In the ravine, a line of trees had dropped to their branches, shearing off lower ones, and would appear quite different for decades to come. Treebrellas, abandoned umbrellas buried up to the ring, with the canopy pointed to the sky, was the best description he could find.

The image startled him, as a nightmare likeness he had seen of women in dresses falling down off a tall building flickered over it, for a second. That day, it had horrified him. Later, he heard that one of the women had lived, though scarred for life. Such fleeting nightmare pictures were a sign of the times.

They had already seen many dead bodies in person as well as in media. Falling buildings had killed thousands of people. Several thousand more were overcome by billowing ash clouds in New Mexico and California. Hundreds died in riots and looting. No one thought it would happen here. However, it did. Of course, it was happening globally as well. Mother Nature's fury of earthquakes, volcanoes, and tsunamis knew no political, or geological, boundaries.

They rode down the length of the ravine until they came to a house. Once, Amber would not have let the opportunity to explore an obvious fault line escape her. Now, she steered away from it, without looking. He knew the feeling all too well.

At the house they stopped. He didn't know if they had reached the town. No other house was in sight. On the porch, someone was sprawled out, sleeping on their back.

He hopped down and handed Crispy's reins to Amber. "I'll check it out."

Alex reached the porch and the person didn't stir. As he stepped closer, he could tell the individual was a male, and covered with ants. He felt for a pulse and there was none. Feet away was a large wooden door. It was so close. The dead man was outside alone.

Chapter 15

North of Tuba City, Arizona

Livia sighed as the truck chugged to a stop. Because of the fear of a nuclear reactor meltdown, most people had fled the quake-ravaged regions. There didn't seem to be any fuel left, anywhere. No electricity to run the station pumps if there had been. Airwaves were empty too, with no television or radio broadcasts for days. Cell phones didn't work, since the tower generators ran out of fuel. And the short wave radio they had been given had shorted out.

She slid out of the seat, still favoring her ankle a bit. After two months, it had mostly healed. If something happened out here, there might not be another clinic or doctor to help. In fact, there didn't appear to be a building in sight.

Corbo grabbed one bag. His face and fists clenched.

She grabbed the other, and her crutches.

"Which way?" Livia searched the barren wasteland around them.

He grunted and walked down the road.

They each had one water bottle left, held against their chest to keep the temperature constant.

Livia pulled out her map, remembering when Amber used to do the same thing. Maybe she remembered them as better than they were, before they knew what was happening to the land. Without any way to communicate with Amber, or her parents, she was alone with Corbo. She would never see them again. Corbo needed her more than they ever did.

Livia hobbled behind Corbo. They would reach Tuba City soon. It shouldn't be much further. The road appeared to wave and weave as the sun pulled the bits of moisture out of the asphalt, and into the air. The droplets would fall somewhere, perhaps at nightfall.

Corbo didn't speak.

Her mind drifted to piecing together what her own mother and Varanda had told them. Eduardo's sister had in-laws on a reservation in southern Arizona. That was where he had gone to meet Adora, Anna, and Jon. Corbo would try to reach there, if he could.

Memory of her mother's tears saddened Livia. She didn't know if

her mom had loved Eduardo more than she had loved her dad. First loves could be like that. Her own first love had married another, and she had never forgotten, or forgiven him.

Corbo's Aunt Anna and Uncle Jon, grim as ever, had refused to tell them anything. Desi had stormed off on his own to find his brothers who had gone search of their distant family.

Aunt Anna didn't know anything about where her brother-in-law and Adora met. Livia's mom didn't know anything about Adora's family. A quick and secret romance and planned marriage. No wonder there had never been any contact. Armed with her mother's notes, and Aunt Anna's vague memories, Livia tied their stories together with the words of Varanda, to figure out where to search for Corbo's father.

Livia's low energy hadn't bothered her while resting at her parent's deli, or even with Corbo's family. Tiredness could be a side effect of the ankle injury. His Aunt Anna had asked her if she were pregnant. At first, she had laughed. At a rest stop a few towns back, a corner store was still open. The pregnancy test came back positive. One more reason to stay with Corbo. Now his father would have a son, and soon to be grandchild, amidst the ripping apart of the nation.

Corbo been so quiet lately, grabbing his attention wasn't easy. He wanted to find his father, and find out why he hadn't been searching for him. Livia hoped his father could be a part Corbo's life. What this new pre-modern life would be, Livia wasn't sure.

A stabbing pain, down the full length of her leg startled her. A tendon was fighting the extreme exercise. Too much sitting and worrying. She hadn't walked much since the cast had been off. This was could be a long trek, several days at least. Walking that far was out the question. Corbo was already far ahead. Being a burden to him wouldn't help in his search. She would have to have a horse, or some other means of transportation.

"Hey Corbo. Wait up." Livia shouted.

She paused and waited, breathing heavily in the early morning sun.

Corbo trudged back to her. "What is it."

"I, I can't walk that far." Livia replied. "I haven't used my leg enough. My ankle is still sore. I'm afraid. It's not strong enough."

Corbo glanced around at the landscape.

There wasn't much, only a few stringy bushes. Nothing to help her walk better. Crutches weren't designed for long distance travel.

In fact, they were wearing out already, and the bottom rubber pieces needed replacing.

"Where are we?"

"Near Tuba City." Livia said, "I'm not sure what's here."

Corbo snickered. "A lot of musical sounds, just what we need. Wind whistled through the body of that old truck the whole drive here. Why don't you stay with the truck for a few minutes? Let me look around, and see if I can find anyone alive in this area."

He picked her up, carried her back, and sat her in the shade beside the truck.

No words were said on the way back as she clung to his neck. Her face felt hot, as she willed back the frustration. Someone, or something, had to be left in Arizona.

"I'll be back soon," he said.

Livia waited.

Corbo would be back. He strode out of sight down the shimmering roadway.

Even though she had always considered herself a country girl, she had never spent this much time alone with the desert wildlife. The last three months, living mostly outside was so different from her life before.

A life indoors with air conditioning, running water, and so many other things she taken for granted. Things that didn't matter anymore. Could she would even remember how to set the thermostat, if power returned? In fact, she couldn't remember the last time she slept under a roof, unless it was that nap at Los Alamos.

Josie and Nathan had always said she could do anything she wanted. They only said it after an accomplishment, not before like her parents did. When her parents said that, she felt hopeless. Now, she was hopelessly trapped because her broken ankle hadn't healed. A burden to the one person she most wanted to help. Why he was different than all the thousands she had helped before, she didn't know.

Sweat dripped off her forehead and landed in the nearly empty water bottle. Corbo had been gone a long time. The shade had moved away from her. A short crawl away, she stopped in the shade. Before long, the shade would disappear under the truck at midday.

She dozed off. A rattling sound soothed her. It wasn't the truck. Livia twitched awake, sat up straighter, and looked around, shielding

her eyes from the blazing sun. The heat rose in waves, bending the light. Mirages of water shimmered along the horizon. An image of a city, or even a building would be welcome.

Livia stood up, and gingerly set her foot on the ground. Holding onto the edge of the truck, she hobbled around it. A horse and rider stared back at her. She blinked, wondering if the vision would disappear. There was an air of the plastic Indian about him. Slick painted skin, a total lack of modern clothing, holding a feathered stick. Rattlesnake tails dangled from the horse's bridle.

"Lo," The figure said.

Livia glanced up at the impassive face above the horse's head.

She stepped forward and reached to touch the horse's face. Two more horses were tethered behind the apparition. If only they were real.

The nose was real. Velvety dry, and air moved through it. The horse snorted, then blew warm air into her hand.

"Thank you," Livia rubbed the horse's face.

"You are?" The figure said.

"I'm Livia. I can't walk far. My ankle is still weak."

"Hm." The man stared down at her, watched, and then rattled the stick. The feathers continued to sway, even without a breeze.

Livia reached up to touch the feathers. "Hawk feathers. Please, don't do a rain dance until Corbo can come back. We need help."

"Why did you come here?"

Corbo's story should be told by him. They had trusted Windy. This apparition was vaguely familiar; perhaps he could be trusted. "Please, can we sit in the shade, and I'll tell you."

Livia patted the horse's nose. It took time and effort to hobble to the shady side of the truck and sit back down.

The man slid off the lead horse, and walked over beside her.

With her eyes closed, she let her Italian background speak through her voice and hands. She saw each event as it had occurred. The story wasn't long; many details didn't matter at the moment.

The person before her leaned against the truck with crossed arms resting on his chest, and no apparent emotions.

Livia began to doubt this person would help her. If only, she had a name to call him, to connect to him, or Corbo.

"Windy once said, 'Sharing your real name gives it power.' Can you help us? I won't ask if I can't call you something."

The man didn't respond.

Livia reached out to the feathers, and almost touched one. It was different from the others. A similar color and shape. It was special somehow. The sun blended the colors of the feather. Her breath caused it to sway in front of her hand. "Is this a kestrel feather?"

A flash of a smile crossed his face. "You may call me Kestrel. Tell me about Windy. What would she want you to do?"

"Windy would want us to find Corbo's father. She made that clear. No matter what, we have to find the reservation his in-laws lived on."

Kestrel, a living history lesson was a reminder of what she had known, and lost, in the present. That past she had tried to teach others to leave behind.

"What will people do now? We don't know how to live like the past. It's been forgotten."

Kestrel tapped the stick on the ground, and the bridled horse came forward. "Come. We must catch Corbo. I have an event to attend, and can't go with you, or I would."

Livia stood gently, and let Kestrel help her onto one of the horses. She pulled her bag up behind her. "He went on down the road."

The words were barely out of her mouth before Kestrel had leaped on the lead horse, and urged it forward as fast as it could go. She gasped and barely held on. Riding could be a wonderful adventure in good times, and a way to keep from cramped in pain with her sore ankle. They should catch up with Corbo soon.

They rode until well past midday.

Corbo appeared on the horizon, little more than a dot. His determined gait had kept him walking well past any distance she could have managed on her own.

Livia didn't know he could walk so fast. The approach of pounding hooves didn't disturb him. Not a good sign at all. They raced past him, as she tried to slow the horse. Her crutches banged against the animal's sides.

"Corbo, wait. We have help."

He glanced up from the road to see her sitting high above him.

"Sorry, I didn't hear anything, what happened?" He glanced at the other horses. "Who is that with you?"

Livia's cheeks warmed. "This is Kestrel, like Windy. He promised to help us."

Kestrel passed a rope to Corbo. "Take the other horse. A few miles on, a cluster of homes ignored the evacuation orders.

Something about some rules."

Corbo laughed as he took the rope. "Sorry can't help it. You look the stereotypical Native American. If things were different, I'd think you rode off a movie set."

"I know. Pieces of tribal clothing from a dozen different tribes." Kestrel shook the stick. "Some people think it may confuse the spirits. I'm not so sure. More mongrel to me. We are all a mixture of peoples, whether we know it or not."

Corbo climbed on the horse. "People see me as Mexican, and I guess I am. I didn't know I was actually born across the border. And then, to find out my father isn't Mexican? Who is he? I have to find out who I am. Will I ever be legal?"

Kestrel steadied Corbo's horse. "You will be as legal as anyone else someday. Mother Nature is making many changes. I will see you again."

Kestrel tapped the horse with a stick and was gone. In seconds, horse and rider were out of sight to the west.

"We never got to say thanks," Livia said.

"Better go on," Corbo said. "We are way behind."

Chapter 16

Tobia, Arizona

Corbo urged his horse forward, not paying any attention to it. Something was different about Kestrel. His eyes and frame brought up memories he couldn't quite place. Some time maybe, he couldn't remember. The horse slowed down, and Corbo glanced around him.

Livia rode up beside him, breathing hard.

Love wasn't something they shared. It was more a mutual agreement so they could both have what they wanted. Livia was his only hope. More now than before, when he thought he had been born here. His dream of a normal life with a good paying job, and a wife, grew dimmer every day.

Before long, buildings appeared in the distance. A group of twenty houses nestled together. They were out of place, with no other buildings nearby. Cactus and scrub bushes were there nearest neighbors. Roofs shimmered in the pounding sun. No yard fences in sight. Two decorative wooden fence sections, with a cactus on each side, framed an avenue. Simple, and requiring no upkeep in the desert. It was strange sight, like a city neighborhood plopped out in the brush.

Without glancing at Livia, he urged the horse to a fast walk. They had to have food and water for themselves, and now additional water for the horses. It used to be easier to fuel vehicles than slow horses. Now, horses might be their only transportation, other than their own two legs.

Nothing obscured the view of the homes and vehicles neatly lined up. Chickens in lawn tractors pecked the ground in safety from coyotes. No dogs or cats lounged on porches. The desert hadn't crept in, so the people must either still be here, or recently moved on. Though no one was in sight.

He had to trust Kestrel. The homes were closed up, with no open windows. It was too hot to be indoors if they didn't have power.

"Hey you. Go back. Get out of the neighborhood!"

Corbo glanced around trying to figure out where the voice came from. At the end of the street, a head peeked out of a door. An arm stuck out, and waved them back.

The horse trotted on down the street. Curtains swayed in windows, and other people opened doors. Corbo reined in at the gray brick house were the first person had shouted at him.

The man at the door waved him away.

"What's wrong?" Corbo asked.

The man glared at him. "This is a private subdivision. Our homeowner's association doesn't allow farm animals here. None are allowed on the street anytime."

Corbo laughed and pointed at the chicken tractors. "You have chickens in your front yards. Those are farm animals."

The man stepped out of the door. "No. Chickens are pest control, not farm animals. They eat the bugs, and even keep termites from destroying our homes. Horses are too big to be here. There is not enough room, or food for them. They're not welcome. Go away."

Corbo had heard enough. He knew he wasn't welcome anywhere. The horse turned, and he slid off. "Livia is hurt. She needs food, and we need water. We won't stay. Please help us first."

The man glared at them, and then glanced around at his neighbors. "It's against the rules."

His neighbor stepped up. "We haven't seen anybody except each other in two months. An hour wouldn't hurt anything."

Another woman from down the street walked up. "Horse manure is good fertilizer. It could help us grow some of our winter crops."

She smiled at Corbo. "Zooney added a new rule that we have to grow our own food since the stores are no longer open. All we have is the little we bought before everyone in the city ran away."

"Not much food here," Zooney said. "I guess they can rest for an hour."

Corbo helped Livia off her horse, and tied the reins to the door rail. The horses didn't pull or tug on the reins, though one snorted. They should be fine for an hour.

As he stepped into the open door, the blast of icy air hit him like a punch in the face. Something he had never known at home growing up, only the broken down ones at school. There had been no air conditioning since their stay at Los Alamos. It took his breath away, and his teeth almost chattered. Goose bumps appeared on his arms. He rubbed them to accustom them to the cold.

The neighbors followed him inside behind Zooney.

Several children swarmed excitedly around the two horses. They pawed the ground, and snorted. The adults stood inside the door and watched out the window. The children patted and rubbed on the

horses; who waited calmly under all the attention. Zooney pointed Corbo and Livia to chairs at a small kitchen table. He turned his back to Corbo and Livia while another man stepped forward.

"I remember when we used to have horses when I was a kid. They were so nice to ride. I'm Fred by the way, and my wife is Fanny." He reached out to shake Corbo's hand as he nodded to a woman with a dishtowel.

Fanny watched as a child climbed up on the rail to hug the nose of one of the horses. "We could have camels. Riding them isn't that much different, I wouldn't think. It would be nice to have camels. After all, they can go for a long time without water. We could trade with other people, travel the land as our ancestors did. It can be done."

Fanny twisted the dishtowel in her hands. "We could have a fun trip every week to find water. A picnic lunch and the kids laughing and playing, that would be great."

The people's eyes shined as they chuckled. They didn't know how to have fun. Not that Corbo was sure what was fun anymore. He glanced back at Zooney.

Zooney took a bucket off the counter and walked to the back door. Corbo followed. Right outside the door was a well. The man removed the cover, and let the bucket down.

"It's a little lower every time. The aquifers are being drained."

Zooney pulled the bucket up, poured a little back in, and covered the well. The cover would keep out bugs and the heat from the sun. They would have water for some time, if the quakes didn't damage them. Amber and Alex know more about underground water systems than he did.

"We chose to live off the line, and all have wells. They have to last." Zooney said.

Back in the house, Zooney sat the bucket on the kitchen table. He used a container to dip a little bit out, and a funnel to fill Livia and Corbo's water bottles.

The people crowded around the table.

Corbo drank about half his bottle of water.

Livia's eyes drooped, arms slack against the table.

He worried she might not have the strength and stamina for the trip. She tired easily these days, and that could be a problem.

Laughter squealed outside. One of the horses had likely let go of a fertilizer plop. Nothing he could do about it now.

There were no visible cats, and no barking dogs. Chickens

clucked in the background. There was something special about this place lost between time. It seemed unreal, almost as if they had some of the best of both worlds. They were missing something. Something important, maybe an understanding of what mattered in life.

Some of the neighbors muttered behind hands held to their mouths.

Corbo shifted in his seat. "So tell me 'bout yourselves. What's this place is called?"

"This street is called Tobia. Tobia rather than Utopia, because we can't have everything. We found sometimes you can't have both the good and the bad. We decided to make our own special unique culture," Fanny said.

"We wanted to take the desert, and try to make it sustainable, and make everyone follow the same rules so that it would be fair to everyone. I don't think it's working. Solar power, though wonderful, isn't always reliable."

She rested her hands on the water bucket. "We don't allow fences, or pools, or most farm animals. It isn't as easy as we thought it would be to be fair to everyone."

Murmurs of agreement sounded from the other adults in the room.

Zooney held up his hand. "We don't have standard natural gas power from town. We do have buried lines that bring us a little reserve power. They don't work anymore. No landlines, cable, or satellite. It's always been enough. We worked in town, and came home to rest with few distractions. Now, we have less than our neighbors on the reservations."

The horses outside pawed the ground; and children laughed.

The adults glanced from one to another and back at Zooney, shifting nervously, as if afraid to speak before him.

So much loss. So much taken for granted, for too long.

"We don't have much in some ways. Without so much stuff, we thought we would have so much more. Not growing our own food to conserve water, we limited ourselves. We are in the desert after all, and every drop of water is precious here."

Zooney reached over and picked up a small container, filled it, and watered a few plants in containers on the counter. "So now we are going to try small gardens, using well water. We hope our wells are deep enough."

Another woman said, "Even though the water table is low, we

hope to be able to feed ourselves. Many of the farmers out here, tried to feed small countries on the desert water tables. The desert can't grow for everyone. Now, that farmers are gone, we hope we can raise gardens. People can grow enough food for an entire year on one piece of land, not much bigger than their homes. We hope to as well, since we have spring, fall, and winter growing seasons."

"Yeah, makes sense. Nothing could ever be perfect." Some days Corbo wished he could be perfect. It would make life a little easier. Of course, if everything was perfect, people wouldn't even know how good their life was. He knew these people wouldn't share any food. There wasn't any to spare.

Someone behind the woman said, "What we have here has worked for ten years. I hope it will keep working."

"So what are you two going to do?" One of the women asked.

Corbo knew he had to tell them something. The real story wouldn't make sense to these structured people. He couldn't tell them the whole truth. Enough of the story to make sense to them wouldn't be a lie.

"We are going beyond Phoenix," Corbo said. "We know we have a long trek ahead of us, without fuel for our vehicle. Can you help us reach there?"

Fanny shivered. "You do know, don't you, that you will be going near a nuclear power plant? No one knows if it's safe."

"We are hoping to find someone with a shortwave radio, and maybe they'll know if it's safe." Corbo fingered the fringe on his pack. In three months, it had almost worn out. Hopefully, it would survive the trip.

"If they are at the plant, they might not broadcast. We don't know what channels they would be using, even if we did have a short wave radio. If the communications team forgot to change the channel during an emergency, everyone would know something was wrong. It was supposed to be the safest nuclear power plant ever built. I worked there once," Fred said.

No one anticipated the continent splitting apart when it was designed. Perhaps the continent was settling for a bit, as he hadn't felt any quakes for a few days.

"Where you going in Phoenix?" Zooney asked.

"We're going beyond Phoenix to a small town. We're not even sure if it's been evacuated. We hope to find my father," Corbo said.

"Then you understand why we stayed," one of the women said. "During the beginning of the quakes we stayed because, well our

rules say we have to stay. We cannot abandon our homes. They're all we have."

"Sadly, some people would consider what you are doing as neglecting your children's safety," Livia said. "I understand. If I had a home, I'd feel the same way. I have parents. I've never felt at home with them. I'm not sure where my home is. Someday, Corbo and I'll find it together."

Corbo reached over, and put his arm around Livia. She was so sure of him. He wasn't so sure of her. Of course, he would stay with her for the convenience of having a nationality. He couldn't imagine a place that would allow them to stay, as one of their own.

"While you're there in Phoenix, check on the animals in the zoos. There are several along the way, there's Heritage Park Zoo, and Phoenix has Wildlife World, as well as the Phoenix Zoo. I'm sure there's others. There have to be." Fanny rung her dish towel, and stared above them at the red birds in the wallpaper. "You can send the camels to us, if they can't care for them."

Corbo laughed. "What do you want me to do? This isn't a vacation trip. Their caretakers are there, aren't they?"

"Animals trapped can't feed or water themselves. They have rights too." Fanny picked up a dish and wiped it with her towel. "They shouldn't have to die that way. It's the middle of summer. This heat wave could kill them all. No way a few caretakers could provide food for them without deliveries."

"Sure. We will be glad to check on them. If the zoos aren't out of our way," Livia said.

Those poor animals, they were as out of place, and out mind, as him. Antarctic penguins would be scorched. The African elephants might survive, if not penned in. As for the others, most had grown too depend on humans for food, shelter, and water. Their survival might depend on their ability to revert to instinct, over training.

Better to change the subject. No time to dwell on such thoughts. "Have you planned how you're going to grow food, without much available land?"

"Well, we don't have anything. Our neighbors on the reservation have tools and some seeds. They've offered to help us. I think we're one of the few non-Native American communities left out here. By not having fences, we hoped to appear open and welcoming to them. They've ignored us. We aren't sure if that's good or bad. Then we decided to ask for help. To ask for seeds, a few tools, and hope." Zooney said.

Corbo picked up his now empty water bottle. "Sir, if you have a few extra water bottles and little food, we would appreciate it. We don't know how far we may have to go to find someone else who may have food and water. Stores may be out there, without anyone to run them, food left to rot on the shelves. If we took it because we were starving, what would people think? Is it more wasteful to let the food rot? I don't know the rules anymore. They've all changed."

Zooney waited a few moments. "The rules haven't changed. I think everything will be back in order, in a few weeks, or months. It's a temporary change. Soon, everyone will come back pouring into the city in the distance. Stores will re-open, and other than the few people who died, life will pick up where it left off when they all abandoned their homes and jobs." Zooney moved a few containers on his counter.

"We will follow the guidelines we have set for ourselves, loosening them a bit, until everyone comes back, and life can return to normal. Rules make life easy. Follow them, and everything works out. Ignore them, and chaos reigns."

Corbo knew better than that. Rules could make good guidelines. Useful boundaries that had to be expandable when needed and agreed to. Sometimes, rules had unintended consequences.

"We may not have much. We do have a little. Enough until we can grow some food. If not, our neighbors on the reservation may have to help us." Zooney pulled out a few bottles of water, and a few packs of dried food. He handed them to Corbo. "Here is some jerky from the reservation, and some travel biscuits. You should be able to go about twenty miles tonight. There are water reservoirs in different places. Some of them aren't safe to drink from. Do you have filters?"

"No," Corbo said.

"Here," Zooney tossed him some coffee filters. "They're not what you really need. They will at least keep dead bugs out, and you never know what else. They may help a little. Good luck."

Corbo stood up. "Don't want dead mosquitoes in our drinking water, that's for sure. We may be back someday. Good luck growing gardens for the first time in the desert."

He helped Livia stand up, and they walked back to the door.

The adults crowded up around him.

Their children had wondered off to a nearby chicken coop to play with feathers and stones.

He helped Livia up onto her horse, and then climbed onto his

own. It would be a long ride to the next town. They didn't know if they would find anyone there alive, dead, or otherwise.

Chapter 17

Pernell, Oklahoma to Alma, Oklahoma

An older two-story farmhouse with a wide railed porch loomed in front of Amber. A man sprawled on the ground by the door. An odd place to sleep, out in the open, in the heat of the day. She glanced around to see what else there was nearby, other than the cows, horses, and dogs behind her. No other people or animals in sight.

Alex squatted on the dusty wooden porch next to the person sleeping there.

Amber slid down off of Fortune, and walked up to the porch. She tied Fortune's reins to the rails.

Alex sat up.

A few feet away, a heavy wooden door was shut.

"What is it? What happened?" Amber stepped closer. A trail of ants scurried to and from the body on the porch. An odor, rather like something out of a deep forest wafted toward her. "There's no hope is there?"

"Not for him," Alex said.

Amber walked up to the door and tried the handle. It was locked. She knocked.

A clicking sound came from inside the window to her right. It creaked open. The head of an elderly woman peeked out.

"Hello." She held the window sash.

Amber took a deep breath, and tried to ignore the body by her feet. "We're trying to find Pernell. Is this the outskirts of town?"

"Who are you? Why are you looking for the town? Everyone left a long time ago." The woman's hands shook.

Something shifted behind the woman. It could have been dust, or something else.

"General Nord said that we should go to Alma, after we left the last place we were at. We found some cows at an empty ranch. The house had sliding walls. Do you know who the animals belong to?"

"Perhaps. I'll let you in, and we can talk for a few minutes." The woman's face disappeared. The window scraped shut.

The door creaked open, only half way before it stuck in a groove in the floor. Little sunlight entered the room.

Amber stepped around the body and entered the door, with Alex right beside her.

The woman left the door open. She motioned to a couch near the window. "I rarely had visitors, even before the catastrophe. Tell me bit more about yourselves."

Amber wanted to know about the dead person on the porch. Who was he; and why was he there? Any answers had to come from the pasty and frail woman rocking in front of her. She told her story to the woman.

Sounds in the background distracted her, scratching, bumping, and snickering. The woman nodded her head continuously, and at the loudest disturbances, glanced at the door leading further into the house.

Amber finished story. "Tell us about you."

The elderly woman nodded with her eyes closed for a few minutes. She opened her eyes and stared at the open door. Then she turned to the window.

What she saw, Amber didn't know.

The woman gazed around at the door leading further into the house. "My son died. He brought his children here. It's his body outside. I can't do anything with it. We will all die soon. There's little food, and little water. I ran out of medication days ago. There's none left, anywhere. Without it, I don't stand a chance."

She put her face into hands and sobbed. "I don't want my grandchildren to die. I can't take care of them. If you would, please take them and keep the safe."

Amber reached out to the woman. "Surely, it's not that bad. You can live without your medication."

"No," the woman said. "I wish I could. I figure I have a few hours to live, if that. And then what will happen to them? No one is left near here. I wouldn't have survived the evacuation, even if I had money to go."

The woman stopped rocking, opened her arms. "Children come out, please."

The door opened, and two raggedy children skipped into the room. Long untidy hair, and stained clothes, that were obviously outgrown. The door swung shut behind them.

"This is Tam and Joe. Tam is four and Joe is three. They can tell you about the house and the cows you found. That was their uncle's farm."

The old woman smiled as she leaned back in her rocking chair.

The broken chair would rattle apart if she weighed any more.

The children danced and capered about the room. Like butterflies, they didn't stay in one place long. Finally, they settled against their grandmother's knee.

"Who are you?" The girl asked.

"We're Amber and Alex." Amber bent down on one knee, and reached out to the little girl. "Tell me what you like. Where do you want to go?"

The little girl sidled over to Amber, glancing back at her grandmother. She cupped her hand and whispered into Amber's ear. "To find my mom. I don't know where she is."

Tam skipped back to grandmother's knee, and stood watching Amber.

Amber waited on the grandmother, whose rickety chair creaked through the silence.

"The children's mother is missing. We aren't sure where she went. Or if she will be back. There are no people left here. You must take the children, please. I'll leave a note in case she comes looking for them."

Amber didn't want to take the children. After all, they belonged with their family. Someday, maybe she could find their mother, since their father had died. She wasn't ready to take on children.

On the mantelpiece were several framed pictures. One stood out, with the children's father in it. A tall woman stood beside him. The woman reminded her of her mom. Maybe these children would not be so different from her. Maybe in Alma someone could take them. Later, they could be sent back to Elmore City, if their mother never arrived. Gina would know where to place two more orphan children. The lost kitten had found a home quick enough.

She walked back to the grandmother and sat down. "Joe tell me about the home where we found all the cows."

Joe flopped on the floor, and crawled a little closer. "What was it like?"

Alex sat down beside Amber. "It was a big house with a big barn, with a horse, and a baby horse."

"The walls were different," Amber said. "The grooves went up and down, instead of side to side."

Joe laughed. "That's Slider House. The walls slide. Air comes in, heating and cooling. It's a fun place to be."

"They can leave the house open at night, without worrying about robbers. Wind whistles through the house at all hours of the day and

night." The grandmother clapped her hands and the children climbed up beside her. "Now children. I want you to go pack your bags, what you can carry on your back. Hurry. Be sure and take a blanket, a brush, and a change of clothes." She patted their backs.

The children jumped off her lap, and scurried out the door. It slammed shut behind them.

She faced Amber and Alex. "You are their only hope. I'm fading fast. You must go, before dark." She coughed.

"The children can't wait. They'll die alone if they stay here. Take them, please." She held out her arms to them, pleading with her eyes.

"We can't leave you to die alone," Amber said. "And your son needs to be buried."

"Even if you could find a few pills; it wouldn't be enough. There's no one making them anymore. Even if there were, there's no way to get them here. I've lived my life. I'll be watching. Don't worry about our bodies."

The children clattered down the stairs.

"Come help us find food," Tam said.

Alex waved to Amber. He would talk with the grandmother.

Amber followed Tam and Joe into the sparse kitchen. The counters were empty. A few cabinet doors swung on rusted hinges. A wood burning stove took center stage, next to an ancient deep ceramic kitchen sink. Amber ran her hand along the ceramic edge. It was beautiful, with chunks missing from dishes falling in too hard. Plenty of room to wash the whole soup pot inside the sink, instead of outside on the counter. A nice place to raise a family.

Tam opened a cabinet door. "Here is all we have."

Surely, there was something somewhere else. A half-empty box of crackers sat near the back of the cabinet.

"We ate the last canned food this morning."

Amber took the box of crackers and searched further in the dim light from the window. A little dust, nothing more. "Let me try a higher cabinet."

Amber opened the other cabinet doors and saw dishes, pans, and containers in the crowded spaces. The last cabinet contained one can of beans. They were a few days out of date. She put it in the bag.

The children followed her back into the front room.

"Is there anything, anywhere else, maybe?"

"Yes. I'm not sure how good. Downstairs," the grandmother

pointed at a small door in the wall. "There were home canned goods from better days, there might be something left." Her rocker slowed.

Amber didn't want the children to see their grandmother die. "I'll hurry." She took a candle, opened the door, and crept down the stairs. Along the wall were lined shelves, full of empty jars. In a dark corner a jar of pickled meat, and a jar of green beans hid behind musty cobwebs. Amber grabbed them, wrapped them in her clothes, and packed them in her backpack. The pickled meat she wrapped in her pillowcase.

Upstairs, she bent down her knee. "Tam and Joe if you come with me, we will find you a safe place to live. There may not be a lot of food this year. Next year, there will be plenty."

They both nodded solemnly.

The grandmother hugged them close, and patted their heads. "You be good for Amber and Alex, now. Mind them well. Remember everything you've been taught. Go now, out the back door, as family."

Her eyes pled with Amber to hurry.

She tapped the children's backs, and escorted them through to the kitchen door. Alex came behind her, closing the doors.

Once outside, she gave him a quick glance, and smiled at the children. "Wait here. Alex will bring the horses around. There's one newborn, and it's too young to ride. We will take will your grandmother's quilt on the porch swing, and put it on the colt's back."

She reached over to pick up the quilt that lay folded on the swing. It was a double wedding ring pattern, in pretty colors. Much like her grandmother's quilts, the tiny hand stitched pieces had been made of old clothes. So much use and memory in these pieces, much like her pillowcase. It was all the children might have to remember where they came from.

Alex walked around the corner with the horses, dogs, and cows.

She picked up the quilt, carried it in her hands, and laid it over the colt's back.

He tried to kick it off.

The children laughed. Tam reached in her bag, and pulled out a sash.

Amber took the sash and tied it around the colt. He would have to carry things now, and grow up fast.

Alex sat the two little children up on the mother horse.

The mother would not leave her baby behind. Amber tied her

lead rope to Fortune's bridle, and followed Alex. Staying off the roads would make it easier on the horses. They would edge back closer to the road, once the children could no longer see the front porch of their grandmother's home.

Almost out of sight of the house, Amber heard a sound, and felt a breath of wind. She glanced back and could see nothing. The dogs herded the cattle on around them, keeping the four horses in the middle of the herd. Alma was still quite far off by horseback. They'd know by nightfall if anyone remained there.

Chapter 18

Alma, Oklahoma

Alex pushed the small group until almost dark. Alma was little bigger than Elmore City. Missing it would be dangerous in these times. General Nord's messenger had relatives there who had remained in case he needed them at Fort Sill. As the sun sank in the west, the first few houses they had seen in an hour appeared on the horizon. He urged the horses on.

The dogs barked, and the cattle sped up a little. They would need a pasture, and water soon. Who knew what else, as Alex had never imagined himself a cowboy. Perhaps, a cowboy was his future, now that volcanoes and earthquakes had ripped the technology infrastructure apart.

"Do you think anyone's there?" Amber whispered.

There weren't any signs of people. No smoke from fires, or smell of cooking food. Grass grew in cracks on the road.

The dogs herded the cattle into an open gate set back from the house. An acre or two of land fenced in with a garden between it and the home. There would be enough grass to feed the cows and the horses tonight. Tomorrow, other plans would be arranged, if necessary.

Alex slid off Crispy and closed the gate behind them.

Amber had stopped Fortune nearby. She ran after the mother horse and led her back to the gate. They helped the children down, and took the quilt from the baby colt.

With the gate careful closed behind them, they walked toward the house. Nearby, the dogs panted patiently. They would keep predators away for tonight, anyway. Amber hadn't found much food at the grandmother's home, there'd be none to share with dogs. Hungry dogs might attack a weak cow, if no other food could be found.

Alex knocked on the door. Voices sung on the other side. He checked for a doorbell, and didn't see one. There was a bell shaped knocker on the door, so he knocked loud and hard. Singing was replaced by rattling and crashing, followed by thump, thump, thump.

He glanced at Amber, not sure what was going on.

Something slid behind the door.

The door creaked open.

"Yes." A man held an iron fence railing.

"Hello," Alex said. "General Nord recommended we check out Alma, and make sure everyone here was okay."

The man didn't move.

"Along the way, we found Tam and Joe, as well as a horse, colt, and a small herd of cattle. The dogs herded them into your yard. I hope that's okay," Alex said.

"Sharon, go look out the back window, and see if what he says is true."

Alex stepped back and put his arm around Amber's shoulders.

The man didn't open the door any further. He didn't close in their faces, either.

"Sorry to be so rude," the man said. "With all the looters about, we have to be careful. We can't let anyone in without knowing them."

"Can the children at least come in and go to the restroom?" Amber asked.

Tam and Joe peeked out around Amber's side.

"Sure. Mary can take these two, and you may go also." He pointed the rod at Amber.

Amber had one hand on the shoulder of each child as she walked around the man, who blocked the doorway.

The man had not even shared his name. His face was pale, worry lines visible. It was no surprise after the messenger's warnings.

"Are there many people left in town?" Alex asked.

The man's face didn't move. No reply.

"I'll sit and wait on the porch." Alex sat and twiddled his thumbs. He didn't know how long the children might take, and Amber herself probably needed to go as well. This unnamed man's good graces would be difficult to reach.

The man stood in the doorway, staring out ahead of them.

Alex glanced back at the street to see what his host watched. Three men with rifles stood the other side of the street.

"We told you and your family to be gone." One of the men shouted.

Alex didn't dare glance back now. He stood up. "Who are you? Why do you want these people gone? Do they not live here?"

The man took one-step back. "Who are you? You weren't here

before."

Alex stared at the lead man. "My name doesn't matter. What matters, is my connection to General Nord. I would suggest you give your name, and why you are evicting this family."

Alex stepped closer to the man. He reached into his backpack, not taking his gaze off the men.

They stepped back.

A good thing, because Alex wasn't sure he could easily grab his handgun. Although he had never fired it, he hoped the sight of it would startle these bullies.

Rustling sounds behind him could mean an ambush. Hopefully, the home owner was about to stand up for himself and help save his own home.

"Do you have names? Do you have a reason to attack this family?" Alex kept talking to distract the bullies.

One of the men laughed and held up a finger for each point. "Of course we do. These people have food, and a home. Their garden is producing well, and we need food. They don't need a home here. They only play music. Now get out of our way!"

Three against one. The odds weren't good. No wonder the man answered the door with an iron rod.

The family hadn't hurt Alex. He was not about to stand aside to let these people be attacked. Especially with Amber, Tam, and Joe inside the house.

One of the men pointed his rifle right at Alex. "Now go, or I'll shoot."

Alex had no idea if their guns, or his, were loaded this point. They could be bluffing as much as him. He turned his gun toward the man. "I suggest you tell me who you are, or leave."

The man scratched his feet on the ground. One laughed at him. Rays of the setting sun brushed the tops of the men's heads.

Alex had to fight back a grin. The scene reminded him of the set of an old Western movie. Of course, in the old Westerns, someone always saved the day. Hopefully, the man of the house had a gun, and knew how to use it.

Alex stepped forward.

A second man lowered his gun, pointing it at Alex.

Alex lifted his gun, pointing it toward the men. "Have you no response? Are you ashamed of who you are?"

The men laughed. "Why should we tell you? We have as much right as you to be here. We have more right to this home. After all

we can grow food for ourselves and others."

"At what cost?" Alex said.

"Doesn't matter," one of the men said. "People will pay what we ask. They have to, or starve."

Something moved silently behind the men. A slithering shadow beyond their sight turned into two dogs. He was sure they were some of the dogs who had travelled with him and Amber. Perhaps the other three were behind him, waiting.

Alex pretended to lower the gun. "What makes you think people will survive until you have grown new food? Where do you expect this family to live in the meantime?"

One man laughed. "They're so soft. They can live in the desert, like everyone else. Their songs would put the coyotes to sleep."

"I'm sure you could find an empty house with a farm, and even crops in the field. So many people evacuated. Keep looking."

The dogs wiggled closer. Another shadow moved to the right of the men.

"Why would we go anywhere else? This place is fine. There is a pond in the back for water, a few trees, and an old plow."

Ignore the dogs, before the men noticed them. Keep the men talking and let the dogs do the work. "Are there more than three of you?" Alex said. It was getting desperate now. These men wouldn't listen to reason from anyone.

"We have a few more. Backup, of course."

They were not going to tell him the truth, and he wasn't going to be able to talk them out of what they wanted to do. He didn't want to fight. Fighting might be the only solution to convince these men to leave this family alone.

One step forward. "How many families are left in town?"

"Seven or eight of us, plus dislocated ranchers." The man adjusted his rifle, and twitched his trigger finger.

"This town had two thousand inhabitants. That means almost one thousand houses. Why can't you choose an empty one?"

"We don't want none of them. We want this one. Let this family choose one of them empty houses." His maniacal laughter filled the air as he pointed the gun at Alex.

Amber and the two children were behind him, in that house. These men's accomplices might barge in the back, and Amber couldn't protect herself. The man of the house didn't act capable of protecting himself and his own family.

The shadows of the dogs crept closer to the men, almost in

striking distance.

Chapter 19

Tobia, Arizona to Cameroon, Arizona

Livia hurried her horse along. This neighborhood sounded too structured. Scared almost, of change. Change was coming whether they liked it or not. Adjusting wouldn't be easy for them. Helping others change their lives had always been her specialty. Stability, like they had, hidden under their rules, was something she had never known. If there had been time, she could stay, and teach them a thing or two. She longed for that security, and the comforts lost when the power went out for good.

Livia pulled out her map and smiled. Amber knew the languages of the geologic features; and had despaired at the lost knowledge caused by roads and cities built through features Livia couldn't even recognize. She looked at maps differently now too. Geologic locations weren't only a place to a hide someone, they were a history book she didn't know the language of.

Something caught her eye as they travelled south. The road went straight toward the San Francisco volcanic fields. Laughing, she realized Arizona had something in common with New Mexico and California: geologic features with similar, or the same, names.

Ancient volcanic flows were a short ride away, along both sides of the road. Arizona volcanoes were listed as dormant, although hot springs abounded in certain areas of the state. If there had been more time to talk to, and learn from Amber and Alex, she might have known how to read the signs of previous quakes, as well as recognize the signs of an impending one.

The horses walked beside the road to save their shoeless hooves. Monotony set in with little to see or hear. Time crept, as the summer sun beat down on them and the fields, empty of visible wildlife.

Livia dozed as her horse followed Corbo. She didn't mind following him. He was after all the one she intended to stay with. He didn't act pleased with her, and she wasn't sure why. Finding his father would bring them both answers and peace. And the baby. The hope, the dream, that the child would have a home with both of them flooded her with joy.

As the sun began to sink, they reached a small circle of houses and stores. Deserted, like everything else they had passed. Abandoned houses could provide protection and cover, as long as vandals hadn't broken in and damaged them. Some owners may have even left food behind. If they took a little food, the people might not even notice. If they returned for it at all.

At first glance, the dusty buildings appeared deserted. Hope glimmered at the sight of lights flickering in three windows, and out the door of the building to their right. It would be a fire hazard if no one was there. Or a danger, if raiders or looters were there.

Corbo handed the reins to Livia and slid off his horse. He walked up to the wooden door and knocked. Minutes passed, and the door creaked open.

A man with a gun peered through the opening. "What do you want?"

"We need a place to water the horses, and sleep tonight," Corbo said.

The man glared at him, and then glanced over at Livia. "Okay. The horses can go around back to the small fenced in area. Wouldn't be okay for more than one night."

Livia led the horses around the side of the building. Desert scrubland didn't provide much grass for food here. No trees or people in sight. No shade to break the hazy heat. Nothing new to see had muddled her thoughts.

She opened the gate and led the horses into the fenced in area.

They trotted by her, springing forward to the nearest clump of grass.

Livia covered her eyes in the early dusk, searching for a place and a way to water the horses. A spigot was on the side of the building, in the corner, next to an old tin tub. She turned it on and hoped the tub was safe for the horses to drink out of.

The horses, with a few snatches of grass in their mouths, walked up and pushed against her. Sweat and sand odors overwhelmed her as she patted them both. They reached for the water to drink, and then dribbled it all over her dusty, dry skin.

Livia laughed as the streamlets left clear lines on her legs. She hurried back to the gate and latched it securely.

Corbo wasn't waiting at the front door. Radio static sounded inside.

She pushed the door open, and walked in.

"No new earthquakes," the voice said.

"Are you sure?" The man that had met them at the door leaned closer to the machine.

"Yes, Tangle. None locally, not in the last twenty-four hours or so."

The man glanced up at Livia, and waved to her. "Come. You need to speak."

Livia walked over to the man sitting behind a tiny wooden table. "Who is it?"

"It's Dr. Evan. Corbo said you know him."

Livia took the microphone. She didn't know what to say. "Hi Dr. Evan. What can you tell us?"

The static grew louder and softer. "Livia, glad you are there. We need you to check out the San Francisco volcanic plains for us. We don't have any contact with the equipment that is there. We need it to be set back online. Corbo can do it."

"Where did he go?" She covered the microphone.

"Had to take a break." Tangle pointed to a door hanging on rusted hinges.

"Dr. Evan what can we do? What do you need? Do you think it's dangerous?"

Static blared in and out. "Of course it's dangerous. Everything is dangerous these days. Be sure and take a radio with you. Tangle can give you one. Have Corbo contact with it when he is closer."

Livia handed the microphone back over to the man. "I guess your name is Tangle."

"At least on radio," he grinned. "I prefer not to use my real name. It's safer."

Tangle talked to Dr. Evan.

Livia walked around the room, full of old electronic equipment, and wires everywhere. She had no idea what most of it was. An old phonograph begged to be touched in a corner. It would work without electricity. On the turntable was a record with a vibrant sheen, as if it had never been played. A rotary phone stacked on top of a teetering pile of phone books. She almost touched so many artifacts. The fake wood, and the real wood, pieces of a past that was long gone, while trying to remain present, crowded the room to overflowing.

"Livia, sorry to be gone so long." Corbo walked up behind her. He took her hand. "Your turn."

He showed her the way through the jumbled maze of closet rooms to the restroom. The water dribbled from a faucet older than both of them. And the electricity worked, sort of. The light over the

sink was probably almost as old as she was, with a dark yellow glare that made everything sickly pale.

As she finished up and walked back through the maze of closets, the odors overwhelmed her. One smelled like moldy bread. Another like stale socks and shoes. A third had someone asleep in it, and it was the only almost clean and organized corner in the place. She stumbled through the clogged walkway back into the electronics room. The hum and hot wire odor struck her nose even stronger than when she had come in the first time. The horse odor must have been washed off her hands.

"You can take this set in the morning. How early will you be up, and ready to go?" Tangle held an electronic box out to Corbo.

"As early as we can. We have a long way to go. I hadn't planned on stopping. Going by horseback is slow." Corbo took the box and sat it near the door.

"Get used to it. Until the grids are back up. Then, it may take months for the oil refineries to work." Tangle focused on the monitor in front of him.

"How are you getting power here?" Livia asked.

Tangle glanced at another monitor. "We have solar for the moment. One cell is wearing out. Not sure how long it will last."

He swiveled around in the tattered chair to face her. "Once it goes, the short waves won't last long without a replacement. No power, no communication."

"Where can we fix something to eat?" Corbo said.

"One of the rooms has a tiny kitchen. Try not to wake my relief. He will be awake when you leave in the morning."

"Is another house open to sleep in?" Livia asked. With so many conflicting odors in here, she didn't want to eat, or sleep, inside.

"Nope. None have power, that's why we are camping out here." Tangle pressed the keyboard and didn't even glance back at them to see if they stayed, or left. The screen flickered as numbers scrolled up and down.

Livia took Corbo's hand and led him out the open door. She glanced back in.

Tangle focused on his screen and keyboard.

Corbo closed the door gently. They went around the side of the building to munch the jerky they had. This was better for now anyway.

"I don't think Tangle's been outside for a while. The odor in there is a bit much," she shifted her pack.

Corbo laughed. "I've smelled worse. If you'd rather sleep next to the horses, I don't think he'd notice."

"They would wake us if there was any trouble." Livia reached for his hand and staring deep into his eyes. "Why did you call Dr. Evan, if you didn't want to help him?"

Corbo unlatched the gate. "Tangle already had him on the line. He wanted Tangle to leave his station to the other ranger. Tangle didn't want to leave, so he was sure glad we walked in."

Livia latched the gate firmly from the inside, and set their packs against the building. Sleeping bags unrolled easy, and hooked together. She snuggled up next to him. It was good to have time to themselves. Nights together could be comforting. She reached for his hand beside her.

He kissed her hand, and held it close.

Chapter 20

Cameroon, Arizona to Sunset Crater, Arizona

Corbo woke with something poking him in the back. He reached to move it, and realized it was Livia's foot. Heat washed over him as he remembered last night. The last rays of sunlight had washed across her beautiful face. He had traced her face with his fingers. Even with her body next to him, he could only think of finding the father he never knew. He had to know why his father had never returned to Livia's mom. Beautiful and sweet as Livia was, he couldn't break the fear that they weren't traveling fast enough.

Livia didn't ask for much. She wanted him happy, and tried in every way she knew to make it so. This baby was a way to keep him legally here. That was the only reason he could of that she had decided to continue the pregnancy in these tough times. Her parents wouldn't want her to have the baby, he was sure of that.

Dawn would light up the sky soon. He reached over, and ran his finger along her chin.

A horse snorted beside him, and Livia rolled over, snuggling closer.

The horse snorted again, bumping the water bucket nosily.

Corbo laughed, and sat up. "Okay fella, I'll run you some water." He rummaged in his pack for a flashlight. After he filled the trough, he patted the horse on the rump. "You better drink your fill. It'll be a long day."

The horse snorted, and nosed the cold water. The other one came closer, searching for the water as well.

Corbo burrowed back into the sleeping bags. It was chilly in the desert night air. A good snuggle with Livia might be what he needed to warm up, if she was awake. He rolled close beside her, resting his arm across her side. Her eyes shone in the starlight. Holding her close, he kissed her nose.

The first rays of dawn peeked over the horizon when Corbo sat up. "We have to go." He twined her hair on his finger.

"Sure. I'll pack our stuff. Pick up the radio we are supposed to take. Do you know how to use it?"

"I think so." He straightened up.

A few minutes later, he was back with the radio and instructions. Tangle's friend had grinned at him. "You might want to be careful out there."

Livia had the horses ready to go. They had eaten all the grass in the tiny yard. Hopefully, it would be enough food for the day. He helped Livia up, and then climbed onto the other horse.

According to the map, they would reach the Sunset Crater by nightfall, if they were lucky. Each hour that passed drained him. The sun showered heat relentlessly. He imagined what it must have been like for his father, somewhere. If he had died in the raid, he might be buried in an unmarked grave. Or, his father may have suffered amnesia. Maybe his father's sister would know. If he could find her.

The heat was relaxing, perhaps too much. The horse jerked him awake as they entered rougher terrain. He glanced around, unsure if they were off track. A road was to his right. If this was the correct place, Dr. Evan said there would be a rock cairn nearby the road. At first, all he saw was smoke, or maybe steam rising. This was not good. There shouldn't be any steam or smoke. There wasn't enough vegetation for a real fire to last, so it could only mean one thing.

Having gazed into the heart of a newly opened fumarole with Alex in the San Andre's, he didn't want to do it now, alone. Corbo didn't have a COSPEC to determine which gases were being released, not that he would know which ones were dangerous, and at what levels. It was bad news, and could be dangerous for Livia. He had to make her stay here for her safety. Could she defend herself against a coyote if needed?

He had to go ahead and find the cairn. Dr. Evan said he would walk him through whatever he had to do.

"Livia, you stay here. Let me go on."

"I'm not staying behind."

"It isn't safe. Those fumes can kill. Or cause problems for you later on."

"They can hurt you too. I'm going. I can do anything a man can do."

He held out his arm to stop her as she tried to urge her horse forward.

"No Livia. It's too dangerous. If you want to have a healthy baby, wait here. Even here may be too close. Hide behind that scrub brush over there."

Tears dripped down her cheeks. The words had stung. She

wanted a baby, and would never do anything to hurt it. Not if it meant their future. She sniffled, rubbed her eyes, and walked the horse over to the scrub brush.

He frowned. There was no need to be so harsh. She did tend to rush head first into things, and think later. He scanned the horizon searching for the cairn. Perhaps that pile of rocks closest to the first bit of steam was what he was searching for. He almost took the horse to stay with Livia, then thought better of it. He might need a quick escape if the place decided to blow.

"Livia, check the map for a place to stay. I don't want to stay here tonight."

She ignored him, and went on around the brush. Normally, he would go to her and try to calm her. There wasn't time right now.

Corbo turned the horse toward the pile of rocks. His horse snorted and sidestepped. He patted her neck, and she calmed down. If Livia, and Mother Nature, calmed so effortlessly, life would be easier.

Chapter 21

Alma, Oklahoma

"Hurry Tam."

Tam went into the restroom.

Amber held Joe's hand and waited.

"It won't flush," the girl said.

"Don't worry about it now. There's probably no water pressure. We'll ask the family in a few minutes."

Tam came out and took Joe's hand, "I'll take him."

Amber smiled. Tam took good care of Joe.

She waited until it was her turn. It was a tiny, clean restroom. Tam was right; there was no water flow. There was a bucket with almost clear water beside the toilet. She poured it in, and the suction pulled the water down. The sewers would fill soon.

Amber took the bucket with her; it would have to be re-filled. She heard a high static sound coming from the front of the house. With the children's hands in hers, she tried to locate it.

There was no electricity in the dusky kitchen. Sharon sat at the table, surrounded by the candle light. A small radio sat on a nearby counter.

"Thanks for bringing the bucket in. Mary can fill it at the well."

Amber sat the bucket next to the back door. "Anything interesting?"

"Sure, we listen to the radio every night. Sometimes the few neighbors we have want to talk, and it's safer this way. I miss evening porch sings."

Amber sat down and examined the radio. "What's the power source?"

"We have a car battery, recharged daily from a small solar power cell. It doesn't give us much, only enough to run the radio for a few hours."

Amber touched the dials. "I wish we could reach General Nord. We are going to Fort Sill, where he has relay stations set up."

"I can't reach him. I can reach Chad. And he can reach family at Fort Sill."

Shouting from outside interrupted Sharon. "Oh no, the raiders

are back. They want our house."

"My name doesn't matter," Alex shouted.

Amber reached for the radio. "What's the station?"

Mary grabbed the radio, turned the dials, and picked up the microphone.

The shouting grew more intense.

Static crackled as Mary searched.

Amber pushed Tam and Joe toward the back door. "Hide under the table."

She ran to front door with the radio and microphone in hand. "Chad, whoever you are, come help at Sharon and Mary's home! We need General Nord now. Please come in." The static continued to click and crackle.

The static crackled, and the voice came on. "Who?"

Amber screamed. "Please contact General Nord now. Come to Sharon and Mary's."

"What's that sound in the background?"

Amber reached the man with the iron rod at the door.

Sharon ran into the hallway. "The raiders shot at the house."

The static on the radio clicked over. A man's voice came online. "You are at Sharon and Mary's?"

"Yes. Please help us."

"Can you take the radio outside?"

"Yes." Amber stepped through the front door.

The homeowner hid beside the doorframe.

Alex was out in the street, pointing his handgun at three men.

They stood laughing, and jeering, aiming a rifle at his head.

Amber set the receiver as loud as she could.

A scream to Alex to be careful would distract him. She tried to stand in his line of sight. As soon as she was sure he had seen her, she spoke into the microphone.

"General Nord reinforcements are where?"

"Reinforcements are on the way." The voice was Chad. Of course, these raiders wouldn't know that.

The men stopped laughing, and jeering.

Barking dogs ran around the corner of the house shepherding two more men. They herded the five men together in a circle. The men pointed their rifles at the dogs.

Amber had no weapon. If the raiders shot the dogs, they didn't have much hope.

"I repeat reinforcements are on the way." The static on the radio

blared.

The men danced, cursing and yelling at the dogs, and pointed their rifles to the sky. One went off.

Amber dropped the radio, and covered her head with her hands.

Alex crawled to her.

Dogs continued barking.

One man screamed.

The dogs jumped, growled, and barked at the men, pushing them tightly together.

The men dropped their guns and ran. They didn't make it far.

The lead dog jumped on the lead man. Down they all went, like dominoes.

A mechanical screech echoed over the volume of the dogs and men.

Amber covered her ears and tried to determine the direction it came from.

Four motorcycles flew into view, and screeched to a halt in front of the men and dogs.

One of the motorcycle group whipped out a rope, dropped his bike, and ran to the raiders on the ground. The dogs kept the raiders down, while the new arrivals tied them up.

"That'll do it." One man said.

It had happened so fast; Amber hadn't had time to think. She stepped back, unsure of these new strangers. The leather, tattoos, and rough looks didn't say much positive about them. Her knowledge of the stereotype of hard rock musicians left her with doubts for the safety of all of them.

Even the woman with them appeared strong enough to knock Corbo down. That would take a lot of effort. The woman hadn't balked at standing on one of the raider's chests as she tied him up. She walked around and picked up the shotguns. Her finger traced each trigger.

"Ralph, call us sooner next time." The biker woman yelled.

The homeowner sat down the metal rod he carried. "You know I don't like violence."

The woman laughed. "You think these raiders would let you get by without violence? They would have killed you and not thought about it. You have to know and speak the language of the people trying to carry on a conversation with you. You know only words, and airy songs."

She waved her hands at the tied up men. "These men don't

know those words. They know body language, and fear. You don't even know body language. Learn it, or you won't survive!" She walked over to her cycle and tied the shotguns onto her bike.

"Chad, I'm back to headquarters." She stood her bike upright, twisted the handles, and drove off in a cloud of dust.

Chad stood near Amber. "She's a bit defensive. Don't be afraid of her."

Amber held the radio so tight her fingers turned white.

"Good idea to ask for the General. He doesn't like my metal band." He smiled at her. "Uncle is glad that I can handle myself as well as he can. The town jail'll have to do for these villains, for now."

The two rough men standing nearby scowled and grabbed four of the raiders, jerking them up on their feet.

Chad watched as they walked the four men out of sight. "Ralph, we'll be back for our bikes in a few. Then you can introduce us to the two new people. If uncle knows them, they can't be all bad." He laughed as he shoved the man he was holding down the street.

Amber shivered. Chad sounded tough. Not as tough as that biker woman. She hoped he never shoved her.

Alex picked up the radio and took her hand as they walked back to the house.

Sharon stood in the door, holding Tam and Joe at her side. Tears streamed down her face.

"Who are they?" Amber asked.

"The bikers are a metal band, who can't practice without electricity. At least our music doesn't require electricity." Sharon tried to smile through the tears. "Come on in. Mary is fixing some food. There should be enough for all. Chad'll come back, and may bring Jerry with him."

Amber handed Sharon the radio, and took Tam and Joe's hands.

Sharon led the way back to the kitchen.

Mary carried food in through the back door.

"We have to cook outside now." Sharon placed the radio on the counter. "It's strange, and refreshing." She sat down and waved to an empty chair.

Amber pulled it out and sat down.

Tam and Joe stood at her knees.

Alex stood behind her.

"They aren't as bad as they look. It's not the first time they saved our lives." Sharon's hands hid her face.

"I know we need to find some kind of middle ground. They need

us, and we need them. Our religion won't allow us to stand up for ourselves. We have to die first." She sobbed.

Ralph walked up to her. "Dear, it's too late for us. I don't know if we can change. We never did work to build our physical strength. Maybe Mary." He took Sharon's hands and pulled them away from her face.

Mary walked in with a bowl of potatoes.

"As long as she doesn't need leather jackets and tattoos," Sharon said.

"Aw Mom, I won't. At least, no tattoos. Leather jackets may be all we have, if we have to hunt our food and clothes."

"My brave daughter. Will you stand up to our religion to survive?"

"Mom." Mary thumped the bowl on the table. "There is nothing in our religion against wearing leather. In fact, all people wore some version of leather, and covered books with it, for centuries."

"With a temper like that, you haven't stood up to those men?" Alex said.

"Oh, I've stood up to Chad and Jerry. Those raiders, they don't look at a female as a human." Mary glared at him and walked out of the house.

Ralph laughed. "Our daughter didn't inherit her stand-up-for-it-ness from us. Must be from when she stayed with her aunt-in-law so much when she was young, and we travelled the gospel circuit. It may help her survive the future now."

Mary waltzed back into the room, and plopped a baked rabbit down on the table. "I'll get the plates in a minute. We better pick what we want before Chad comes in. This is barely a snack to him."

She raced through the house to the back with a bucket of water.

Amber stood up. "I'll get the plates, where are they?"

Sharon pointed to a cabinet.

Amber prepared the table.

Everyone piled the food on plates. There wasn't much left over.

Mary hurried back in, her cheeks flushed. She had changed to a pretty shirt, more open in front than the other one.

Her mother passed the mashed potatoes. "He's okay to learn protection from. Don't try for him."

Mary glared at her. "I'll do as I please."

"Be sure you really want to, if you do," Amber said.

Mary stopped midway of dipping the potatoes on her plate. A tear slipped down her cheek. "I love him as much as Jerry does. Maybe more. I've known him longer."

"Mary, I'm here." Chad shouted outside the back door.

Mary blushed as she dropped the potatoes on her plate. "Come on in."

He wore a nice shirt and nice jeans, with no jacket. The tattoo on his arm was gone too. Maybe a lot of it was a cover to make them appear scarier than they were. The ploy had sure worked on her.

"Fake tattoos?"

"Sorta. Now tell me about you," he said.

Tam patted her hand.

"Alex, you'll explain, won't you?"

He began their story as Amber took Tam down the hall to the restroom.

"Stay with you." Tam whispered as they walked back.

Chapter 22

Alma, Oklahoma

Amber and Tam's voices drifted back up the hallway.

"So you see, it's been a long few months for us. We are helping General Nord check for hot spots," Alex said.

Chad grunted and chewed his rabbit meat.

"Aren't you far away from where the earthquakes and volcanoes are?" Ralph asked.

Mary picked up empty dishes.

"Not intentionally. We were in Arizona, when a massive quake hit. Our pilot was on her way to her wedding near here. Now, we are traveling to Fort Sill to see the damage at the fault lines there, and report what we see along the way."

"Is there much damage?" Sharon asked.

"In places." Amber sat back down. "Lots of new faults, and new micro-plates forming. Chad, you said you know General Nord?"

Tam climbed into her lap.

Joe reached over to her from Alex's lap.

Chad swallowed some water. "Sure do." He checked his watch. "He should have some support here soon. On good roads, it would take an hour to reach Fort Sill from here. Not sure about now."

Mary turned around from the sink. "You aren't going are you?"

Chad finished chewing. "Nope. I'm here to protect your family, and a few others. I'll be sure the raiders are handed over to them."

He pushed back his empty plate. "Alex, why don't you come with me? You can come back for Amber and your kids in a bit."

"Well, they aren't mine, or hers. We found them," Alex said.

Chad stood up. "They act like yours. All attached to you and everything. Come on."

Alex stood up, and sat Joe in the chair, pushing it closer to Amber. "You don't mind, do you Amber?"

She finished her last mouthful of food. "Be careful Alex."

Mary frowned as they left.

Once outside the house, Chad laughed. "Mary is so much fun."

"Do you like her?" Alex asked.

"I love her very much. Her parents aren't happy about it."

"What about Jerry?"

Chad's laughter brought him to a standstill. "Jerry? She's as much interested in guys as I am."

His laughter died down. "The fear of Jerry keeps Mary on her toes. Gives her spunk, when nothing else would. Jerry knows, and plays along."

A good idea. Maybe someone could help convince Amber she needed a partner, preferably Alex.

Chad stopped in front of the town hall building and opened the door. "In you go. They'll come here."

Alex entered the dimly lit building. It wasn't much of a town hall. In fact, it reminded him of an old sitcom his parents used to watch. There was a desk where Jerry and the other two bikers sat across from a holding cell with the raiders in it. The door slammed shut behind him.

"Chad'll be back in a few. Sit." Jerry pointed to a chair.

Alex couldn't tell what was real, and what was fake about the bikers, and maybe that was the way they wanted it. They talked about their music. At least, that’s what he thought they were talking about. It was hard to know with the talk of beats, roads, and other terms he couldn't pronounce. Of course, if he sprouted volcanic terms they'd feel as out of place as he did right now.

"Sun bounces along the rim, would work."

"No, we can't reach the deep bass for that anymore."

"What about."

Alex gave up trying to understand and watched the raiders in the holding cage. Without their guns, they didn't look so menacing. Perhaps, they were scared now.

One of them noticed him, and rattled the cage bars. "Hey let us out. We can protect you from them. They aren't listening."

Sure enough, the bikers were so busy talking; they appeared to not notice the man.

Alex glared at the raider standing at the bars. It was the man who had fired at him, and missed. "Sorry. Only one way I'd let you out."

"What's that?" The man said.

Alex crossed his arms on his chest took one-step forward and shouted. "If they carry all of you out dead."

Silence filled the room. The raiders didn't move in front of him.

"I think I'll sit outside and wait." Alex said to the bikers.

Jerry nodded at him, with a hint of an up turned lip.

He stalked out the door, and sat on the steps. This anger was unexpected. Never had emotion run so deep and provoked an outburst before.

The man had tried to kill him. Perhaps that was why. It was disturbing to wish someone dead; even if they had threatened him and the woman he loved. There, he had said the words, even if they were in his head. He loved Amber and would do anything to protect her, and even those two children who had so quickly attached to her. He clenched his fists together.

"I do love Amber," he whispered. "Now, I have to tell her. I hope she feels the same."

Chad and Mary walked toward him in the moonlight holding hands. Chad had tossed his biker jacket back on, and somehow replaced the tattoo on his neck. Maybe it was a string tattoo that stuck on with glue, like a sticker. They walked closer, talking so low he couldn't hear them.

Better not to disturb them. They needed some time to themselves. Alex stood up, and walked ahead of them, down the moonlight beam.

He stopped at the corner, not wanting to become lost. The stars drew his attention skyward. In the last few months, he had seen more stars than he could remember ever seeing. As the clouds of smog cleared, more were becoming visible. This was what he wanted to give his children. Moonlight and stars to see by at night. A brighter daylight from the sun. Not the smog of the cities he had known. By winter, with its crispness, the light would be brighter. So bright, they would be able to see almost as well at night, as in the day. The sun was almost as beautiful to him now, as the volcanic lava had been a few months before.

A pair of stars on the horizon grew larger. Alex wiped his eyes. The illusion didn't end. A slight rumble sounded, as the two "stars" were flanked by more lights. They were approaching headlights. He ran back to the building steps.

Chad and Jerry were there waiting for him.

Mary was nowhere in sight.

"Safe?" Alex asked.

"Hope so." Chad held out a long walking stick to Alex. "Know how to use that?"

"Sure do," Alex said.

"It may be General Nord's troops. Hold in a protective fashion, not threatening, until we know for sure."

Alex stood beside Jerry. Chad leaned on the other side. All held sticks, barring entry to the building.

Four vehicles pulled up around them, stopped, and pointed their lights at the building.

Alex took a deep breath. With fuel shortages rampant, they had to be reinforcements from General Nord.

The door of one opened, and a person in a camouflage stepped out. Could be military, or a hunter. Alex let his stick shake a bit.

The person behind the headlights shined a flashlight on each of their faces. "Alex, Chad?"

"Your name?" Chad said in a husky voice.

The light went back to Chad's face. "Corporal Puma. General Nord said to be watching. Much trouble going on here?"

Chad relaxed and leaned against his walking stick. "Enough. I think this is the worst of the lot. A little infighting over solar power. We try to keep enough to practice our instruments from time to time. Nothing we can't handle. Come on in for the captives."

Chad went to the door.

Jerry stayed behind, and so did Alex. They each chose a side of the door.

The men and women who had come for the captives stepped out of the vehicles and walked inside.

Noise inside didn't surprise Alex. Apparently, the raiders struggled as they were led out of the holding cell. Two men came out the door, with the ringleader of the group, handcuffed and yelling.

"You can't make me. I have rights." He glared at Alex holding a stick up beside the door, visible in the headlight beams. The raider glanced the other way, searching for an escape.

Jerry stood there. She lifted her walking stick to block the raider's hope of escape.

The man slumped, and let the two military guards escort him to one of the vehicles. They pushed him into the back of the vehicle, rather like an old-fashioned jail truck from the movies.

Alex would have laughed if the situation wasn't so dangerous.

The other raiders came out no problem. The one the dog had jumped on earlier today had an obvious limp.

After they were all in the truck, and securely locked in, Corporal Puma turned to his fellow soldiers. "Watch them and be ready. Be back soon."

He walked up to Alex, Jerry, and Chad at the door. "Let's go in

and talk a minute."

Alex's knees quivered. He led the way in, using the stick to hide his quivering knees as the desert night chill began to soak the landscape.

Alex sat back down, this time on the floor, as there weren't enough chairs to go around.

Corporal Puma glanced at the small group gathered in the room. "Do you think there are any more raiders?"

"We haven't heard of anymore at the moment," Jerry said. "That doesn't mean more won't show up later."

"We can hold these men a few days as an emergency situation. You five can take care of yourselves, and the other families?"

"With some help. Please. We need them all together, instead of spread across the whole town. We don't want anyone to have to give up their own home. I think we need an emergency declaration, to protect them. No one can go out alone in the day, and all be in a safe home by night fall," Jerry said.

"That way, too, we won't fight over the solar power. There will be more to go around." One of the other members said.

"Everyone here agree?" Corporal Puma said.

The group murmured in agreement.

"Okay. An order can be written up and executed tonight for the safety of all. Give them the right to check on their homes each day, if they so desire. It'll wear off soon." The corporal set a pad of paper on the desk, and wrote in the lantern light for a few moments. With a final flourish of the pen, he handed the page to Jerry. "Off you go."

Jerry took the page; and her friends with her, leaving Chad and Alex in the room.

"Okay Alex, are you and Amber ready to come to the base? What happened?"

Alex clasped his hands around his knees. Where to begin the story?

"We made it to Gina's wedding in Elmore City. After the evacuations, we followed orders. Pernell was our first place to check. We picked up two orphaned children there. Now, we are here."

"Ready to go?" The corporal tapped a pen on the desk.

Alex hesitated. "Well, I'd like to be. I don't want to be any closer to the quakes with the children."

"Neither Sharon or Mary will take them?" Chad asked.

Alex shook his head. "I didn't feel comfortable asking. Amber

may have after we left."

"Alex," Corporal Puma sat his pen down.

Alex looked up.

"Do you like the children?"

"They are good kids."

"Does Amber?"

Alex remembered the dinner. "They adore her. Half a day and they're in her lap."

"This event will bring out thousands, perhaps millions of orphans. Best to leave them with whom they are happiest at this point. No time for the niceties of the no longer existent social services. We will go get them." Corporal Puma pushed his chair back from the table.

Alex and Chad followed the corporal out.

They walked down the street. "Amber is going to be upset at leaving Fortune behind again."

"Mary and Jerry will take good care of her. Maybe you will be back soon." Chad slapped his back a little roughly, as they approached the house.

"Maybe you can send them to the ranch. Gina would appreciate them."

"Soon." Chad stopped when the porch came in view.

Sharon, Ralph, and Mary blocked the door.

Amber stood with Tam and Joe in front of her. Her arms rested on their shoulders.

"Amber, it's time to go." Alex took her hand.

Joe took one hand and Amber the other. They walked toward the vehicles, and didn't look back.

Chapter 23

San Francisco Mountain, Arizona

Livia led her horse to the bushes Corbo had pointed to. Frightening emotions overwhelmed her these last few weeks. Too much death and abandonment. Everything and everyone she had known were long gone. That was all it meant. However, she wasn't so sure. Corbo needed to stay safe to find his father. If he went off alone, she couldn't save him.

The horse settled into the shady place. Better to take care of herself, and their unborn child. Corbo wasn't abandoning her. He would be in sight, and not far away at all. A yell could reach him if anything went wrong.

She slid off the horse, and let him graze on the shrubbery. Not much nutrition for a hungry horse. Maybe she could find something on the other side of the tall shrubs.

Livia limped around the bushes. "Corbo. Come quick."

The cloud rising from the mountain in the desert scrubland had been hidden behind the bushes and hills. Now, it spiraled upward, searching for a break in the clouds. There was far more smoke than a campfire, and not spread out enough for a wildfire.

She trembled and pointed.

Corbo rode up beside her.

He groaned and stared at the mountain in front of him.

"It's the San Francisco Mountain. It could blow us to San Francisco." Corbo slid off his horse and pulled out his pack. "I have to call Dr. Evan now. He may not want us to be any closer."

"How far is it?" Livia had always lived for danger in the past, before she met Corbo. Now, she wanted safety. To stay with him, and to safely bring their child into the world.

Corbo pulled the radio out. "About ten miles. Too close for comfort if volcanic ash billows out. Plus."

He adjusted the dials on the radio. The static was loud. At last, he reached the channel. "Dr. Evan, come in please."

Static, escaped with an increasing tempo. "Just a minute," a vaguely familiar voice said.

More static, slower this time. "Corbo?"

"Dr. Evan, it's not good. Haven't found the cairn. Did find the San Francisco Mountain."

"You sure? Sunset Crater is the youngest." Static broke into the reception.

"I'll have Livia check the map. If we haven't gone the wrong direction, it should be. Maybe the last quake moved the old mountain back over the hot spot."

Livia unfolded the map, and it trembled in her hand. She didn't think her hands were shaking. With an upward glanced, her hands did begin to shake.

The smell of sulfur hit her nose. Weeds blew as if there were a moderate breeze. A low rumble intensified in the distance, and passed under their feet. She screamed. The map tore down the center, as it covered her nose.

"What is it?" Dr. Evan shouted.

Corbo reached to comfort her, holding her close.

The rumbling stopped, for the moment. Tendrils of steam drifted away on a high-level breeze.

"Sir. Not good. The steam appears to be dissipating. It was a minor quake, for sure." Corbo glanced at her. "Sir, should we get out of here? I don't want Livia here. I haven't seen any wildlife."

"How are the horses?"

The horses tugged at the branches they were tied to.

"Skittish. Not running, yet."

"One minute." Static rang in the air for a few minutes.

"You are a bit south of multiple faults. What does the air quality feel like? Are you watching the mountain?"

Little spurts of steam rose, reminding her of a teapot about to boil. This was not where she wanted to be. She trembled and stepped back to comfort the horses.

"Dr. Evan, it's puffing like a sleeping dragon," Corbo said.

Laughter came across the static. "Never heard it stated that way. You two don't know enough. I wish Alex and Amber were there."

People talked in the background, discussing what should be done as the static broke through the communications.

The horses tossed their heads, and tried to pull away.

Corbo turned his horse away from the steamy mountain.

Livia stuffed her map fragments in her bag. She patted her horse's head and pulled her close. If she could only calm her own beating heart, maybe they would calm as well.

"Corbo, it's too dangerous, and too late. Go back to the road and

head south. We'll send someone for you." The static took over Dr. Evan's voice. If he said anything else, they missed it.

Corbo shut the receiver off, and jammed it in his pack. "We better hurry." He helped Livia onto her horse, and returned to his horse.

The two horses ran for the south.

Livia tried to steer them toward the road, at least a little. The horses had already had a long day, and lack of food and water slowed them before long. Once they reached a fast trot, they glanced to the sides if they saw a potential waterhole. None looked deep enough to water them well.

At one tiny pond, the horses turned. Snarling wolves scattered. Two tattered human skeletons were half-immersed in the dark water. One wolf hadn't given up its prize, a half-eaten, thin cow only feet away.

Livia jerked back on the reins and pulled them away. She clutched her stomach to avoid vomiting.

Chapter 24

San Francisco Mountain, Arizona to Camp Navajo

Corbo tried to keep up with Livia's horse. His horse, however, slowed to a trot, with his head drooping, blowing, and slobbering. Corbo almost hollered out to Livia to wait. He'd rather she be safe. As Livia passed almost out of hearing, Corbo's horse went down.

He fell off, and rolled over. They had almost made it to the road. The horse thrashed around, mouth foaming and screeching. Livia was out of sight, not even watching for him. She'd be back when she realized he wasn't beside her. Of that, he was sure.

Corbo moved carefully, and checked for broken bones. Aches and pains shifted as he adjusted on the ground. Scraped and scratched legs for sure, with perhaps invisible damage. He groaned, picked up his bag, and reached in. There was the radio, in pieces. Further down, was the handgun. He grabbed it and pulled it out.

The horse thrashed about, with three legs in the air. Not a good sign.

Corbo crawled close enough to grab the mane. As soon as he held the horse's head, it relaxed a little. It continued to grunt and snort, nostrils flared.

The three legs in the air felt okay to his untrained hands. The fourth hoof was trapped and twisted at an unnatural angle in a prairie dog hole. The horse would never again stand on its own. Corbo tried to soothe the horse by patting its neck.

"Sorry, old boy. Wish I'd gotten to know you better."

Holding the horse's mane, he pointed the gun below the ears. With his eyes closed, he pulled the trigger.

The horse gave one more shudder, and flopped, landing on Corbo's leg. The gun was almost empty. And now, his knee hurt badly. It was dark, and coyotes would be coming soon. It was too dark to walk on the injured knee. He sat his pack down beside the horse's body, which would make as good of a landmark as any nearby.

Horsemeat would be valuable in a land where food was scarce. If he could save it from the coyotes. Coyotes were crafty and

dangerous.

He might be able to save it, if Livia came back soon.

Night crept across the land. Desert creatures scuttled as the shadows lengthened.

A sore knee wouldn't let him walk far anyway. Tomorrow would be worse. Stiffness seeped into his knee as darkness fell. If Livia kept riding for help, the vultures, and coyotes howling would bring her back to him and the horse.

Corbo pulled the pack close. The guts of the radio spilled out in his hands. He tried to straighten the wires, and close the case with them inside. It wasn't easy to put it back together. All the parts had fit in there somehow before. As it clapped shut, the ground shuddered beneath him.

The ground twisted, and moved right, left, up, down. He lost all sense of direction and fell over. The shaking continued. After a loud pop, the ground stilled. Corbo sat up.

Ahead of him, the San Francisco Mountain glowed in radiant splendor. Almost like a campfire should appear up close, was glowing from the top. A large steam cloud surrounded the mountain peak.

Corbo didn't know much about this kind of volcano. Or, what kind of danger he was in. According to Alex, volcanic gases could be more deadly than the lava because they spread farther, and faster.

To keep it in view, he spider walked backwards, grabbed his pack, and tried to stand.

Groaning, he fell. There was no way he was going to be able to run to find Livia on a banged up knee. Where was she? She should've been back by now.

Corbo rolled on to his hands and knees, and tried to stand, using the horse's body for support. A low grumbling interrupted the pain signals racing to his brain. Glancing south from the mountain, he saw lights pointed in his direction. He hoped they were headlights of someone from Camp Navajo.

Corbo sat down and gasped for breath. He held his pack, and his handgun, in case it wasn't a rescue. The lights approached. They stopped a few yards away. It was a rather large vehicle.

Livia jumped out, and ran to him. "Are you okay?"

"Not sure. Help me up."

She reached out her hand, and he pulled himself into a standing position. The knee tried to buckle under him. "I think I'll need your crutches."

She laughed. "Sure. We'll find you some of your own soon. I need mine. What happened to the horse?"

Sweat from running, dirt, ash from the volcano, and blood, both from the fall, and the bullet through the brain, covered the animal's carcass. Corbo wished he had known the animal better, and could have saved it. It had saved their lives at least once in such a short time. How would they ever repay Kestrel? "He stepped in a prairie dog hole. His leg is broken. I wish we didn't have to leave him. I'm sure the people at Camp Navajo could use the meat."

Kestrel, now in full military regalia, and another man, stepped out of the elongated pickup truck, and walked up to them. "It's okay. Here lean on us. We will help you to the vehicle."

Corbo didn't cry out as they led him to the vehicle, hopping on one foot. As they opened the door for him, he gazed back at the San Francisco Mountain one last time. Steam rose, and a small reddish glow bubbled at the summit. There appeared to be a small red and yellow stream flowing down the side of the mountain. He slid inside the vehicle.

The men and Livia hurried back to the horse. They pulled it around the truck, and dragged it up into the bed. Livia's horse reared nervously. In moments, they coaxed her up into the truck bed.

Livia slid in beside him. He relaxed a little as she reached her hand out for his arm. "Let's go a little slow, for my horse's sake."

Corbo squeezed her hand. "I wish I could've saved the other one. I'm not sure how we will travel now."

"Do you drive much?" Kestrel asked.

Corbo laughed. "Well, I did. Until the truck ran out of gas. Now my knee will keep me from driving for a bit."

"We can find you another vehicle. Where are you trying to reach?"

"We are trying to reach a place south of Phoenix where my father may be."

The driver had a tough time driving along the broken road. Potholes weren't making it any easier. He focused on the road.

The tiny glowing dot of San Francisco Mountain didn't shrink behind them.

"We have a few errands that need to be run. If you run them with us, perhaps we can work something out."

Corbo groaned. That would mean more time away from finding his father. Without a vehicle, one horse wouldn't be enough. "What kind of errands?"

The driver steered the vehicle. "We'll talk to Dr. Evan and General Nord first. You do know them?"

"Yes," Corbo said. "They might not be happy with me either. No one is these days."

Kestrel leaned between the seats. "Do you intend to eat that horse? Most people wouldn't like that idea."

"I guess they've never really been hungry then. I've ate horse meat when one died of natural causes, or something like this. Why waste the animal? Meat's too valuable. Too many people go hungry."

"You would do well here. We see horses as part of our everyday lives, and can't imagine our lives without them. There isn't much food for them here. We won't let them starve to death, and us to."

Corbo understood.

"What about you, Livia?" Kestrel said.

Livia squeezed Corbo's hand. "Once, I would never have thought of eating horse meat. In the last two months, I've learned what hunger is. Horses are as much a food source as a cow. I'd rather have beef to eat, and keep my horse to ride. Right now I'm so hungry; I think I could eat the horse."

Corbo laughed and hugged Livia.

The gates of Camp Navajo were passed without question, or comment. The driver stopped at a building, and Kestrel helped him out. Corbo leaned on Livia's arm. He had never leaned on her before. His other arm placed most of his weight on her extra crutch because he was afraid of hurting her.

Corbo never saw what happened to the horse.

Livia opened the door to the building, and he hobbled through, gritting his teeth as he lifted the painful leg. Inside, people hurried to help him across to a chair.

"We'll find a doctor." one woman yelled as she grabbed a landline phone.

Corbo sat down. He hoped he hadn't damaged it too bad. This was not the time, or place for crushed bones. People who got hurt these days wouldn't stand a chance. Modern medicine only worked with electricity. Ancient medicine had been forgotten. Except maybe by Kestrel and others who lived on reservations.

He didn't want to think about the pain. The lights flickered. Solar power energy levels could be reduced and keep the bulbs from working at full potential. Motion, and the pain in his knee, were too much. The room swirled.

Corbo woke up stretched out on a cot.

Livia sat beside him, holding his hand. "It's okay." She squeezed his hand and smiled at him.

He groaned and tried to move.

"Don't move now. The sedative they gave you will help. I don't know how much is left."

"Sedative? They have some?"

"A few. Don't worry. They're adjusting crutches for you. That they have." She squeezed his hand.

"How long have I been asleep?"

Livia leaned over and gazed into his eyes. "Maybe an hour. You need more." Her warm breath caressed his eyebrows.

"Okay." His eyes closed. His concerns could wait till morning.

Clump, clump, clump. Heavy boots on the tile floor woke Corbo.

Livia sat beside him, holding his hand.

The door opened without a sound, other than the clump of boots.

A man with a stern expression walked into the room. He reminded Corbo of General Nord. "Are you better?"

"Yes sir." Corbo struggled to sit up. "I need to be better so I can go see my father. I have to find him."

The man walked over to the bed and held out his hand. "You're not going anywhere in your condition, on your own, anytime soon."

Corbo shook his hand. "Sir, tell me who you are?"

The man grabbed a chair, and pulled it over to the bed. "I'm usually called Corporal Eagle Eye." He sat down and looked at them both with a twinkle in his eye. "Please, tell your story."

Corbo began the story. After a while, his mouth became dry.

Livia handed him a glass of water and took over for a bit.

"And so we ended up here," Corbo said at last.

Corporal Eagle Eye had clasped his hands around his knees and bent forward to listen. Now, he leaned back and smiled. "So, you ran away from your friends." He looked them both full in the eye. "And now, you need new friends. Well, let's see what we can do."

He clasped his hands and faced the ceiling. "Dr. Evan wants you to check out the Lake Mary faults."

Corbo groaned. "We've no idea what to look for, or how to make sense of it. Amber and Alex can recognize lines and dirt colors. There was something about the movement of rocks. I don't remember what, or know how to read it. I did the grunt work for Dr. Rebecca. I didn't learn enough."

"What about you?" Corporal Eagle Eye turned to Livia.

"I don't know a thing about fault lines. I didn't learn from Amber," she stammered. "I wish I had. I might have, if I hadn't hurt my ankle. Then, I had other things on my mind."

"So going back north to the faults won't help you, or us. General Nord wants you to do something else as well. I guess you know about the nuclear power plant?"

His hope of finding his father slipped away. He definitely didn't want to go there. And Livia should not be allowed there either. "You can't go there. No way."

She squeezed his hand. "I'll go wherever you go."

"Perhaps I can send you on a different mission?" Corporal Eagle Eye said to Livia.

"What would that be?" Livia said.

"Let's see." Corporal Eagle Eye twiddled his thumbs. "There isn't much pain medicine, and there are three missions you are needed on. Plus, your own."

He looked directly at Corbo. "They are all intertwined. You can have the pain medicine, crutches, and a vehicle. If, and only if."

Corbo groaned as he shifted on the too small cot in the darkened room.

"Three vehicles will go out. One, with both of you, Kestrel, and equipment. Corbo will check out the nuclear power plant, while Livia visits Heritage Park, and Out of Africa."

He waited a moment for that to sink in. "You'll know what's best for the animals. We have to be sure they've food and water, are set free, or destroyed if too dangerous," Corporal Eagle Eye said to Livia.

"I, I can do that," Livia said.

"I need you to be sure the nuclear power plant is completely shut down. We can't risk anything. Understood?" He waited on Corbo's answer.

"Yes sir," Corbo said.

Corporal Eagle Eye stood up. "If this part of the plan goes well, one truck will go off to do Dr. Evan's work. While you and your truck will go to find your father." He walked to the door, glanced back.

"Good luck. If you decide to do as I suggest; you may leave in the morning."

Corbo held Livia's hand. They didn't have much choice. They were in this together. At least she would be a little bit safer while he was at the nuclear power plant. He rested his head on the pillow and closed his eyes.

"Livia, you need some sleep too. " His hand slipped out of hers.

Bumping and banging almost roused him, as someone brought another cot for her to sleep on. He drifted off to sleep. She would be close beside him. He could rest.

Chapter 25

Fort Sill, Meers Fault, Oklahoma

Amber dozed off. Every time they hit a bump, she nodded awake. Vague images drifted out of reach, Who, or what they were, she wasn't sure.

The vehicle stopped at the looming gates of Fort Sill.

Another gloomy, rule driven base.

They were allowed through without difficulty. At least the guards didn't ask for identification. She wasn't sure where hers was, it may have been lost in all the turmoil. Tam and Joe didn't have any at all, or at least she had forgotten to ask.

She hugged the sleeping children closer to her, waking them into a drowsy state of semi-consciousness. They grumbled as they adjusted, drifting back to sleep.

Soon, the truck rolled to a stop in front of a long building. She tenderly shook the children until they woke.

Alex helped Joe out of the vehicle. The boy stumbled on something in the dark and fell into Alex's arms. Alex lifted him on his hip, and stepped out of the way.

Amber stepped out and helped Tam down.

She leaned up against Amber as they followed Corporal Puma into the building.

"I'll show you the sleeping quarters. We are all bunked together right now. Sorry." He rushed down the candle-lined hallway.

Amber hurried after Corporal Puma. Tam's sleep sweaty hand almost slipped from her grasp. Candle light flickered, and a few blew out as they raced past.

He stopped at a door, and held his hand out. "Here you go. Best we can do. There are sleeping bags inside the door."

Tam held Amber's hand, and gazed up at her face. Her breath came in tiny gasps.

Alex, carrying Joe, stopped beside them.

Various snores resonated from deep within the room.

"I'll be back in a few hours for you. Try to rest now." He sprinted down the hall.

Amber glanced at Alex. "Well I guess we have to find

somewhere to sleep in the dark."

They walked in. Candle light from the hallway showed them a little path to where two empty cots rested side by side. Amber reached the first empty one, and sat her pack down. "Let's put Tam and Joe on the sleeping bags, with their quilt over them, and between us," she whispered.

They set up the sleeping bags, with the quilt cover, and within moments, Tam and Joe snuggled in.

"I need to go find a restroom," Amber whispered. "I'll be right back."

Out in the hallway she glanced up and down. To her right were the restrooms and coffee area. To the left was the long hallway of closed doors. Thankful to know where both were located, she hurried back to bring Tam, so she wouldn't wake up disoriented in the middle of the night.

As tired as she was, Amber had difficulty drifting into deep sleep. Corbo and Livia were somewhere out there, if they had survived. Her hand squeezed her now useless phone. No more chats or texts with Karen. Her charge cord had long been lost. Tom would watch after Karen. Dr. Rebecca was back east on a project. If they were all safe and alive, she hoped to see them again.

She fell into an uneasy sleep full of vivid dreams of her mom, Brandon, Karen, and Dr. Rebecca all back home in California. It was home, though nothing appeared in its normal place. The dream bounced to Corbo and Livia searching for Dr. Evan, because he knew something important. She drifted along, trying to unravel the tangled threads for a clue as to what the dream meant.

As she glimpsed the clue, her body shook uncontrollably. At first, she thought she was in another earthquake. Then, she realized Corporal Puma was shaking her shoulder. "Come on, wake up. Sorry to be so quiet. People are sleeping in shifts right now."

Amber rolled over, trying to stay on the narrow cot.

Tam stretched out in the sleeping bag beside her, eyes blinking.

"Have some coffee. Meet me in the lounge beside the coffee maker in twenty minutes." Corporal Puma hurried away to shake someone else awake.

Amber reached down to wake Tam. "Come on, we'll take our bags and go change. Wake your brother. It's time to go."

Tam sleepily rolled over and patted her brother's hand.

She would be a good big sister.

Amber sat up and pulled her pack together. She reached over to

Alex. "Come on Alex, we have to go. I'm afraid it's going to be another long day."

He groaned, and rolled over. "What hit me yesterday?"

She laughed quietly. "You don't remember? Don't worry. You will." A quick kiss on the cheek ought to wake him.

He sat up, and rubbed his head. "Oh yeah. Long day yesterday."

They gathered the packs, quilt, and sleeping bags. Alex dropped them off in the tiny, dark conference room beside the coffee area.

Amber took a candle into the restroom to change clothes. She had to be careful, as she had never used candles as a primary light source before. Flapping clothes near a candle could spell disaster. Starting a fire wasn't the way to begin the day. Back in Elmore City, they waited till the sun came up, and changed in rooms with light sheets over the windows instead.

"Tam, you change first."

Amber held the door closed, and watched the candle flicker. Avoiding sudden movement, she sat the candle down and changed while Tam waited on her.

Coffee hadn't appealed to her until recently. As she blew to cool it, she wondered how long they would have coffee, or hot chocolate for Tam and Joe, before the supplies ran out. Could coffee and cocoa grow here? She didn't want to drink it often, if it wouldn't be available much longer.

Alex held his cup at waist level, and watched her. His smile sent shivers up and down her spine.

Disoriented from lack of sleep, Tam and Joe yawned and stretched.

Amber sent them into the meeting room, and let them snuggle up in a corner with one of the sleeping bags and their quilt. Soon they were fast asleep with their cups of hot chocolate beside them.

Amber and Alex sat at the bare wooden table and waited. The candle cast eerie shadows along the room as the flames flickered. Partial faces visible for seconds. As the candles burned down, and out, what would long dark buildings without windows do for light and temperature control? She was too tired to talk, and had no idea what she wanted to do next. Other than find a safe place for Tam and Joe.

The door squeaked open.

Joe screamed.

Tam yawned and rolled over, patting her brother's back.

"Oops. Sorry." Corporal Puma pushed the door part way closed.

"Didn't think they'd be asleep. Kids are usually wide-awake."

"Yesterday was a long day for them," Amber said. "A painful day."

Colonel Puma sat down at the table. "Wanna tell me about it?"

Amber glanced over at Alex. "Well, they know. I'm not sure when, or if, their mother died. Their father died, maybe twenty-four hours before we found them. Their grandmother was dying, and we don't think she made it through the evening. She begged us to take them with her last breath."

Corporal Puma held his hands out to Amber. "I'm so sorry. Is there anything we can do?"

Tears rolled down Amber's cheeks. "I want to find them a safe home. A safe place from all of this disaster." Her arms lifted in a helpless gesture.

"We will," he said. "Now Alex, what do you want?"

Alex patted Amber on the shoulder. "I want Amber happy, and with me if possible."

Corporal Puma said. "I wish it was that easy. First, I have someone to take care of the children."

The children tugged at her heart. She didn't really want to leave them behind.

"I need you to explore the Meers fault, and report back within twenty-four hours."

Another fault. Her dream job, she no longer wanted to do. It changed too fast now. The children would feel abandoned again.

Corporal Puma leaned back. "Alex, I am sending you to check on the formerly dormant volcanic region within the Wichita Mountains. It's going to be a dangerous journey. I'm afraid your journey may take two days."

Amber grabbed hold of Alex's hand. She didn't want to let it go. Too many people had already died, and many more were missing. If he were lost, or killed, she would be alone. Her mom, Brandon, and Karen, all gone too far away for her to visit or talk to again. Alex was her only connection to her past, even if she wanted to push him away as much as she wanted to pull him close.

Tam and Joe might want to find a real family, even if Tam had said the day before she wanted to stay with Amber. She laid her head on Alex's shoulder. "Is there is no other way?"

"Not in the amount of time we have. Trina will stay here with the children. Your teams will come find you in about half an hour. Be awake and ready to go." A tear trickled from the corner of his eye.

As soon as he was gone, Tam jumped up, and stumbled crying into her arms. "Be sure and come back for me."

Amber tried her best to wipe away the tears. She could make no promise to the child. After all, the faults were as likely to split with her next to them, as at a distance. She patted the child's head, and whispered soothing words. Soon, she led her back to the sleeping bag.

"You have to be brave for your brother, and explain." Amber whispered as she rubbed Tam's head, and closed her eyes. "Sleep now. We'll do our best."

Amber glanced back, and realized Alex watched her.

She finished her coffee, and grabbed her pack. "Let's step outside in the hallway, and let Tam and Joe sleep."

In a few moments, a well-dressed woman walked up to them. "I'm Trina. I'm supposed to watch Tam and Joe."

Her confident voice was crisp with a hint of fun hidden underneath. Trina would take good care of the children. "I think they're asleep. Be careful with their grandmother's quilt. It's all they have."

"I'll be sure and take good care of it, and them. There is plenty of food, and games to play. There are a few other children staying here as well. We are letting them all play together, and visit, as long as they get along. My own three are a few years older than Tam and Joe," Trina said.

Amber tried to smile as she glanced back at the children. Their eyes were closed as they burrowed under the quilt. Of course, they could be pretending to sleep because they knew she was leaving.

Trina reached out her hand. "Your teams will be here soon. If the children sleep much longer, they may miss morning outside play. Inside, there'll be able to play in one of the old re-purposed training rooms. Most of the children enjoy that. You never know what they might find in there. Don't worry it's child proof. Be safe, and careful out there." She walked into the room.

Amber rested her head on Alex's shoulder. "I'll miss you Alex. Be careful today and tomorrow. Come back soon."

Two people in military uniform came down the hallway. "Amber, you'll come with us to the Meers formation. You know what you're looking for?"

She hugged Alex one last time, and kissed his ear. Amber picked up her pack and walked up to the man and woman. "What are your names?"

"You may call us Rinny and Jen. Let's hurry. We have a long ways to go to be back by nightfall," Jen said.

They hurried down the long empty candlelit hall. Their feet echoed through the halls. There were supposed to be hundreds of people here, none were visible, or making a sound. Maybe they were all in meeting rooms, or out on the base lands.

She followed Rinny and Jen out the door. Several vehicles were parked under the overhang.

Rinny unplugged one from a solar power generator, and Jen showed Amber where to place her pack. Similar to one she had ridden a year ago. It wasn't much more than a large four-wheeler. A lightweight enclosed area, big enough for four people, or three people and packs. Several packs were already stashed in one empty seat.

"We have a little power. Not enough to run the whole building, especially at night," Rinny said.

"Before the quakes, we used to go out to the Meers fault region and explore it," Jen said. "We will know where the changes are, and you can tell us what they mean."

Amber strapped herself in. "That's good, because I've never been there before."

Rinny drove over the rocky terrain for what seemed like hours.

Amber was jounced around far more than she ever had been on Fortune's back. They drove past a small lake, then a larger lake, and wrapped around it. Before long, they drove into the opening of a deep ravine. It was an open topped tunnel as far as the eye could see. There was a zigzag pattern to it with fresh open scars.

Rinny stopped the vehicle, and they got out.

Something large and metal sprawled across the ground.

"What is it?"

Rinny and Jen whistled at the devastation in the ravine.

"I can't believe the windmills fell," Jen said. "They said it couldn't happen. No earthquake would be that strong. This is where much of the local power came from."

"What a fault line," Amber said. "I've never seen one so deep, or so long. It's deeper than most houses are tall."

Rinny backed up to the vehicle. "That's why they put the windmills here. The wind whistled through the canyon. It was a great power source. We wondered why the wind run generator stopped. We better get out of here."

Amber had a fleeting thought of Tam and Joe. This was her job.

The corporal expected her to view more of the damage. "We have to go further. How long is this ravine?"

"It's miles," said Jen. "I wouldn't want to be down here if another quake struck."

"Neither do I," Amber said. "We have to see further down the ravine. Either view it from inside the ravine, or on top. If an earthquake hits while we are on top, it could be as deadly as being at the bottom." Amber's hands trembled. The consequences of a quake could be as deadly as not finding the answers to report back to Corporal Puma.

Rinny walked back to the vehicle. "Come on then, let's hurry. The sooner we leave, the quicker we can be back. What do we need to be on the lookout for?" He asked as he turned the key in the ignition.

"Jen, pay attention to any odors. If you smell the least bit of sulfur, let me know immediately," Amber said. "Rinny be careful. I may have to ask you to stop for a second, so I can check a few of the formations. Anything that has changed, please mention. Try to it point out, so I can check it out. We don't have much time."

Rinny drove about fifteen miles per hour through the ravine. Rocks and boulders were strewn across the ground. Some had been on the ground for decades, centuries, or millennia. Others, only a few weeks. From time to time, the motion of the vehicle bouncing along caused Amber to wonder if the ground was shifting under them. She couldn't be sure if it was the vehicle, the momentum, or tiny earthquakes.

In several places, she got out to view where the ground had recently faulted. New hairline fractures that weren't on any known map. Previously, this would be a great cause for celebration, to find a new fault, or an undocumented branch off an old one. Instead, it increased her fear, and that of the two people with her.

Rinny stopped. "I don't dare go any further. I've lost count of how many fallen windmills we've passed."

Amber glanced around. "At this stage, it wouldn't matter. We know there's been massive movement here. No sign of fumaroles. It's too dangerous to stay any longer."

Rinny floored it as fast as he dared, back out toward the open mouth of the ravine.

At the mouth, they heard a massive crash. One more distant windmill must've fallen.

The ground began to shake.

He pushed it a little further before he stopped.

They took the time for one last glance back at the ravine. Scrub brush slid down the southern side. More boulders fell as the fault slipped, barely beyond their tracks.

Amber closed her eyes. Safe for the moment. Her arms and legs shook, from more than the quake.

Rinny drove until they reached the large lake. They stopped near the edge. Shorelines tilted at an odd angle. Waves didn't reach the shoreline closest to them. Another symptom of the quake.

Jen groaned. "I'm afraid our fears have been well founded. The lakes may have breached. We may have trouble getting back to base."

"Doesn't matter. We have to eat now. Or we won't have the energy to make it back. Amber, hand me my pack, please," Rinny said.

Amber reached for his pack. At least she hoped it was his. She was too busy examining the land in front of her. Even though she didn't know it well, and they had drove fast by it before, she could see some changes. Rocks had shifted, areas had uplifted, while others had lowered in a short span of time.

"Everything's so different. It's not worth checking anymore. We almost need to wait until Mother Nature decides to calm down. I wanna hurry back to Tam and Joe." Tears trickled down her cheeks.

"Two more minutes." Rinny gulped a sandwich. Soon, he turned the ignition back on, and they began the trek back to base.

Chapter 26

Fort Sill to Wichita Mountains, Kiowa Lake, and Deer Creek, Oklahoma

Alex watched Amber leave with growing concern. She could be in great danger, and he wouldn't be there to protect her. They both had a job to do, and he knew that. His life had changed more than he ever expected. Three months ago, this would've been the greatest opportunity he could ever have. A chance to walk on a live volcano, other than the ones he had grown up on. Now he was afraid, for Amber, and himself as well.

He glanced back in the room. Trina sat and read by candlelight, waiting on Tam and Joe to wake up. It wasn't only for him that he wanted Amber and himself to survive. It was for these two as well. Tam and Joe had only known them for a day. Their attachment though fast, was a bond he didn't want to break. An unspoken promise with them, and with Amber.

Footsteps pounded down the hall. Corporal Puma walked around a distant corner with two young men beside him. He hurried up to Alex. "Sorry, these are all I can find. Call them by their nicknames Jax and Trax. They've at least been to the range you're going to. Good day." His feet clumped together, before he scurried off down the hallway.

Alex tried to grin at the two young men. "I guess you haven't been here long."

One stepped forward, and held out his hand. "I'm Jax. No, we shouldn't be doing this. We didn't quite complete basic training. That's why we don't have a title or any other job right now. I'm not sure if basic training is going to exist anymore, so we can't try again."

"Perhaps not like it was." Alex said. "I guess we better go. It could be a long day and night." He picked up his pack and followed the two silent young men.

It would be lonely without Amber. Thinking about her hair, her eyes, and her laughter caused an ache deep in his chest. Fighting for breath, he struggled to keep up. If it was going to be like this, he couldn't think about her while he was doing his job.

They went out a side door, and Jax unplugged a vehicle. "Your friend is checking the area the wind power comes from for nights. It doesn't work anymore. Solar power for daytime energy. No other backup power."

Alex climbed in. The bent and rusty roll cage wasn't much protection against flying rocks, or if the vehicle rolled over. It was better than no protection.

"It'll be a long drive up Deer Creek. We've been checking out the local hotspots the last few weeks. This one needs an expert opinion." Jax backed the vehicle up, and they were on their way.

"What is the name of the formerly extinct volcano in question?" Alex rattled around, strapped in between packs.

"We don't know. We can't find a name on any map. I'm sure someone, somewhere, knows the name," Trax said.

Jax didn't follow the road. He followed a general northwest direction, slowing to point out fumaroles in the distance. They were everywhere on this once volcanic plain. Steam spiraled from recent eruptions. Others show no signs of current activity, from this distance. Alex couldn't tell for sure.

At one point, he asked Jax to stop. "What about that one?"

Jax stopped the vehicle a few hundred yards away from the cinder cone.

"That one was definitely letting off steam a few months ago, during the biggest plate shift. It's too bad I didn't have a working camera that day. My batteries had already died."

"Are there many more like that?"

"Sure, a few. We are about to cross the road. Then it's more open, and there are more large volcanoes further separated, different from the cinder cones here."

"Okay, we better go on then." More volcanoes didn't sound as exciting as it would have a few months before.

It wasn't long before Jax had to stop and check both sides of a crossroad. "We don't see many vehicles anymore. Nobody has power. Alternate fuels are being used for heating at night, and cooking meals. We check the road anyway. You never know when a herd of animals might come running by."

Trax laughed. "A rancher herded his cows down this road a few days ago to the base for our food."

They reached an area where there was more grass, with scrub brush trees growing in the distance. Hills and mountains crept closer as the vehicle floundered through the scattered terrain. In the distant

past, these mountains had all been over a hotspot.

Trax told the story of the region as they road. He pointed out landmarks and signs in boulders almost as well as Amber could. Once, Oklahoma had tried to split, and this was the place. Or, at least a part of it. The split area covered the whole Wichita Mountain range. It was a nasty scar that had not healed. And now, it might be reopening.

Amber would be fascinated by the fault lines she was going to see, if she wasn't afraid of them. The Meers fault was unique for being so long in the middle of the continent. The New Madrid, as well as the Rio faults were similar in position, and length, of shifting internal plate boundaries.

In some ways, the skin of the earth was like the skin on your hands; little lines going every which way, and not always visible. The things that you do each day could affect those lines on your hands. A cut could change their shape and positioning, much as a cut on the Earth's surface would change the shape and function of the fault lines, even causing others to rip wide open.

A volcanic eruption could increase or decrease the pressure on the local fault lines, pushing them in different directions, causing earthquakes that otherwise might not have occurred. Or at least not occurred at the moment.

They passed small ponds and lakes as fast as Jax dared drive. Some of the gushing streams were new, or perhaps truly ancient, and had been dry streambeds for many generations. Nearing midday, they reached one small pond at the base of the mountain.

"That's it," Jax said. "We'll eat and then hike up the mountain. It's nearly seventeen hundred feet above sea level."

Alex pulled his pack from on top of the others, and stepped out of the vehicle. He walked over near the small pond, and sat down. Opening the pack, he pulled out his last gas meter. At least it was portable, even if it wasn't a full range COSPEC. It would measure the most important gases.

He reached further in his pack for the radio Corporal Puma had handed him hours before. He turned on the radio, and searched for the signal. Corporal Puma, or his designated assistant, would be listening.

The meter beeped and buzzed. Several gasses were higher than he would expect to be normal. Nothing outside of safe range; which was good in this valley between the mountains. He gave his report, with the meter beside him.

"Keep up the good work," babbled through the static.

His sandwich tasted like cardboard and paste. He closed his eyes as he ate. Amber's smile could light up his day. He missed her so much.

Laughter brought him out of his thoughts. He grinned as he realized he was hugging his sandwich. At least what remained of it. Half the sandwich had fallen on the ground to be attacked by ants. He moved back and let them eat.

Jax and Trax laughed as they finished drinking from a shared water bottle.

"Must be someone special," Jax said.

Alex gulped the rest of his sandwich.

"A person whose sunshine brightens the day is always a good thing. Keep your mind on the hike. Are you ready?" Trax closed the water and grabbed his pack.

"Almost." Alex closed his pack with the radio inside, and kept the meter in his hand.

About halfway up the formerly dormant volcano, they felt a few rumbles. The ground under their feet shifted. Alex steadied himself and glanced up. Fresh steam erupted from the top. He held his meter up. Gases were up even more. Not deadly yet. Not safe either. He was glad Amber was elsewhere.

They stumbled on to the top. He climbed up between Jax and Trax. In front of his feet was a glowing volcanic vent. The plug pulsated in active magma. Steam poured out around it.

The gas meter in his hand beeped. Alex didn't take the time to read it. It would record what it measured. He took a deep breath, ran forward as close as he dared, let it measure, and ran back.

"Come on. We have to go."

Jax and Trax stood rooted to the spot, staring at the scene.

Alex grabbed their shoulders, dragging them from the vent's trance.

They stumbled down the slope, as the ground beneath them changed shape.

Boulders crashed, narrowly missing them, and their vehicle below.

The vehicle had been shifted closer to the pond.

They gasped for breath as they reached their picnic spot.

Alex gazed at the changes occurring on the unnamed volcanic mountain. The hot spot had been punctured. Like an angry pimple, magma rose, pulsed, and oozed out. Lava could wash them away,

as water washes microbes off your skin.

Within minutes, Jax slammed the vehicle into gear, and raced as fast as he dared back toward Fort Sill.

Alex struggled to pull out the radio, and call Corporal Puma.

The vehicle bounced across ditches and boulders.

He struggled to hold on, and shout into the microphone.

"The gases, here they are." The gas meter flew across the vehicle, almost out the cage, and dropped down to the floor. "I'll share them later. Fell to the floor. Volcano about to erupt. Coming in."

The static crackled off.

A strange silence occurred.

The vehicle stopped as it was about to cross Deer Creek.

The hint of sulfur drifted down the creek.

"Floor it." Alex shouted. "Or we're dead."

The vehicle jerked across the stream.

Alex held on as tight as he could. He wasn't sure if all the blurry activity he saw was his head jerking from the turbulence, or the earth moving.

Within moments, Jax had to slow a little bit. "Water."

Alex searched in a bag for a water bottle, and handed it up to Trax to give to Jax. In that moment's rest, a boulder slid off a nearby hill, and dammed the stream they were riding beside.

"Mother Nature is as angry as the raiders."

"You bet. It's been a chore to try to keep them from hurting people. We've sent the soldiers everywhere we can." Trax held the bottle to Jax's lips. "One for me too, if you can."

Alex felt around in the bag. The ground shifted as he pulled it out, and it rolled under the seat. He reached under the seat and managed to grab both it, and the gas meter, which still beeped wildly.

He handed the water bottle to Trax and took the empty one, as Jax turned the vehicle, pale-faced.

"Afraid we won't make it," Jax said.

"Why?" Alex asked as he fiddled with the buttons on the gas meter.

"These vehicles aren't meant for fast travel without more backup power. We don't have any. We are going to have to slow down, or walk all the way back."

Alex groaned. "I'll call Corporal Puma."

"Don't bother," Trax said between sips. "He'll be frantic with base

reports. You got one report in. Listen, in case he calls for you."

"He has no one to send for us, anyway." Jax steered the vehicle as best he could through the shaking rocky terrain.

Chapter 27

Sedona, Arizona to Wilson Mountain Arizona

Livia had always felt confident walking, or even running, into danger. It was a strange sensation. Rather than going forward, she wanted to run away screaming, dragging Corbo with her to some safe place. Preferably, not back through some long forgotten volcanic plan; or earthquake fault line that had reawakened.

Part of her mind begged to go to Out of Africa. The rest of her worried it wasn't safe. The possibility of hungry animals was one danger, there were others as well. Something deeper perhaps. This pregnancy had changed her. She wished she could call her mom, something she never thought she would want to do.

The road was bumpy in places, with potholes, twists, and pavement breaks. Several times, they had to stop and let the drivers out to verify it was safe to go on. In a few spots, they pulled off the buckled road, and drove on the desert plain past the hazardous crumpled pavement.

Empty desert crept by the window. Livia searched for, and dreaded, steamy vents signaling a new volcanic eruption. The road wrapped around the base of an enormously spread out mountain. She reached for her pack, to find her map and see if the mountain was labeled there.

A wisp of something made her glance back up, out the window. She couldn't decide if it was steam, or maybe a bird soaring high in the cloudless sky. It could be rising water vapor shimmering off the desert sands. A second glance showed something was there, far in the distance, almost out of sight.

"Everyone ready." Kestrel shouted. "No telling if the people living in Sedona are still there. We lost contact almost a month ago. The few people left were scared of raiders they had seen, and gunshots they had heard."

"Or, if any of the original inhabitants are even alive here." The guard beside him whispered.

The vehicle slowed as they entered the town. Parking lots and buildings sat empty. Dust devils played leisurely where customers once parked and shopped. Cats and dogs ran as the vehicles

passed by. Weeds grew in the sand and dirt that crept across the asphalt islands. Empty of people, the lots were full of abandoned vehicles sitting at odd angles, tires missing, gas tank doors opened to the elements.

They reached the end of the first section and veered west along the abandoned road. To the north, brush and sand stretched as far as she could see. Wind blew it across the road, making it difficult to determine where the lane was at times. To the south, an abandoned housing subdivision sprawled, with no sign of people.

Moments later, they had entered another section of businesses over run with the recent sandstorms. Store doors shut against the sand beating on them, trying to break in. Sand always snuck in through invisible cracks. The floors and shelves would need major cleaning, if the stores ever re-opened.

"Once we are outside of town, we will stop for lunch. There used to be a diner there. Wonder if it's still open?" The driver said.

Chapter 28

Sedona, Arizona, Last Ditch Diner and Village of Oak Creek, Arizona

Corbo's muscles ached as he tensed in a protective stance. Corporal Eagle Eye had given him another gun, and more bullets, in case they ran into trouble with raiders in the city. Hopefully, he wouldn't need them. They crept by each building, watching for danger. Shadows flitted in the shade. They could be animals, tiny high clouds, or even a trick of the sunlight through the glass. Caution was advised.

They reached the last building of the business district. Endless desert greeted them.

"The Last Ditch Diner is less than a mile away," Kestrel said. "I used to come here and explore the ditch, along with a few scientists. They dug and talked about fossils, and used lots of other sciencey terms. What do you think they would see now?"

Corbo grunted and relaxed. "No idea. I wouldn't know what the differences are."

The restaurant was between two sections of highway. Kestrel drove into a median parking lot. Sand and dust devils wrecked their havoc in the heat of the day.

"Doesn't look good," Corbo said.

"No. Better be prepared. Livia, you stay behind." Kestrel glanced back at her.

"No way. I'm not staying. You wouldn't know spoiled food if you saw it. I would. I need to go in too." Livia had already opened her door. "Watch out for snakes and rats inside."

Corbo shivered at the thought. Perhaps she was right. After all, she had helped her parents run a deli for as long as she could remember. "Stay close to me." He caught up to her.

Livia reached the door. She gave it a slight jiggle. "It's open. I'll brush the sand away."

She used her foot to move enough sand to open the door enough to step through. It stayed open, caught in the sand drift. She sniffed through the door. "Stuffy, possibly mold and yeast growing. Lots of rats. Don't touch them or their droppings. It'll be dark. They

probably don't have power for the lights."

Livia followed the beam of sunlight peeking into the stuffy storefront. She checked, and then picked up, a broom by the door.

"No spiders on it. It may scare a snake or a rat away."

She walked down the main row of tables. They were covered in spider webs full of decayed bugs, dust, grit, and rat droppings.

Scurrying feet scattered around the room.

Rat tracks crisscrossed on the dusty floor. Snake trails wove through tracks. Droppings littered the floor under tables. A rabbit bounded off a chair.

The swinging door to the food prep area hung on broken rusty hinges. Its lower edge stuck in a pile of dust on the floor.

Livia slid it out of the way, and walked through.

Corbo followed. Rat tracks and spider webs had taken over. No sign of people recently. Food had to be available, somewhere here. Several cabinets with thick metal doors hid under the back counter. His hand reached for one.

"Don't open it!" Livia shouted.

"It's a food cabinet," Corbo said. "It's thick to keep the rats out."

He bent down and opened the door.

Corbo gasped as he jerked back. The putrid odor was sickening. Rats scurried out the front door.

Livia grabbed his hand, covered her mouth with the other, and dragged him out of the building. They coughed and choked on the rancid musky combination of rat fear urine, and rotten food.

They collapsed on the ground, in the shade of the vehicles. Gasping for breath, the heat of the sand seeped through their clothes.

"What did you see?" Kestrel asked.

"Nothing." Corbo heaved, and hoped to forget the stench soon. "Close door."

One of the soldiers walked up to the restaurant. "Yuck, how did you ever go in there?"

"Corbo opened a refrigerator cabinet door after we went in." Livia sat up. "He didn't listen. I don't think there is any safe food in there. Unless, you like E-Coli and botulism. I didn't see any canned or boxed foods."

"Nope." The driver said. "Everything was trucked in, and handmade. Guess we better eat here then. The drive through the Village of Oak Creek may be more desperate."

Corbo ate his sandwich, and tried not to look at Livia. After all, if

he had listened to her, they could have eaten inside on the tables, even if it was stuffy. After eating, he went around the shady side of the building. They might not have another break for a while.

A rattle disturbed his concentration. In a tiny line of shade, a rattlesnake coiled with a large rat half in its mouth. It slithered under the building's foundation, a few feet away from his feet.

Rattlesnakes wouldn't naturally be out in the heat of the day. It must have been in, or under, the building and trying to escape the noxious odors when it caught a meal.

Corbo backed up, and hurried back to the vehicles.

He took Livia's hand. "I'm sorry. If we could have eaten inside, we could have sat on chairs instead of the warm ground."

Livia laughed. "No way could we eat in there. All those rats. No telling what diseases they were carrying. The tables were feces covered and deadly." She patted his hand. "It's okay. You may have saved us. Breathing the air from rat droppings can be dangerous when that many have swarmed."

"I didn't see any food for them."

"There are always crumbs we can't see, or notice. Bugs trail in. Mice and rats gnaw in to eat the bugs. Snakes slither in through their holes to devour the mice and rats. All the food is already devoured in there. They'll leave soon," Livia said.

"I saw a rattlesnake too, around the side of the building."

Livia shivered in his arms. "I'm glad we are away from there. It's not a place I want to be. This transition time is scary." She leaned her head on his shoulder.

Corbo patted her hair. It was silky and soft. If there were somewhere safe he could send her. Somewhere far away, where food and sleep were plentiful. Maybe she would be happy again.

"Be ready," Kestrel said. "I'm worried about up here. It's an outpost in between the two towns. Should be totally deserted."

Corbo pulled away from Livia as a tear slipped down her cheek. "It's okay," he whispered. "Maybe it's as asleep as Sedona was."

She rubbed her face, and leaned to the window as Corbo pulled out his gun, in case of danger.

It wasn't long before they spotted trouble.

"Men, ragged and dusty to the south." Corbo lifted the gun off his lap, ready to shove it up to the window.

Kestrel slowed, letting the other two vehicles catch up. "We are doing this because?" Kestrel said.

"Hey, I would never have come this far off my track," Corbo said.

Kestrel steered forward. "I can barely see the road."

"You know where it should be?" Corbo asked.

"Sure."

"Watch for traps," the guard beside him said.

Corbo eyed the men skulking in front of the first house they passed.

"More over here. Fraid we're surrounded." The other soldier said.

Corbo groaned as the vehicle ground to a halt. A quick glance showed the other soldier was right. They couldn't go forward, or backward without running over someone.

"I don't wanna do this," Corbo said.

"Wait a minute." Kestrel rolled down his window. "What can we do for you?"

One snarling male stepped forward. "Give us the vehicles, and go on your merry way." He laughed long and loud.

"Sorry," Kestrel said. "Can't do that. We are on a military mission of peace."

The male took one step closer. "There is no military anymore. We are the rulers here. Give us the vehicles." He motioned to his followers who pulled out guns, and pointed them at the vehicles.

"Do it now, or we shoot."

Kestrel laughed. "Now if you shoot the vehicles, they won't work for you long will they?"

"The vehicles don't matter. It's the food you carry we need." One of the followers shot above the vehicle.

The driver raised his arm enough for Corbo to see.

They would have to fight.

Livia was crouched down, hidden in the seat. If these men saw her, it would be all over for her.

The windows slid down.

Corbo stuck his gun out, pointed right at the leader.

"Pull you followers back," Kestrel said.

The leader let his head lean to one side, glanced at Corbo, and then at the driver. He opened his arms wide. "All I want is peace, and food for my friends. Your friend can't understand you anyway. I'll forgive you if he shoots." The leader lifted his arms in a sweeping motion.

Corbo pulled the trigger, shut his eyes, and dropped to the seat. Screams, shouts, and bullets flew through the air. He heard a pattering sound, and opened his eyes, glancing up.

Kestrel shut the reinforced windows, which had saved their lives.

He drove crazily through the followers, trying to avoid hitting one.

"Think you got him," Kestrel said.

"I wasn't watching. I'll never be the same again."

"Nope. One never is. We can't go back through here."

Corbo sat up as Kestrel found the road.

Both vehicles were right behind them. They raced forward, as fast as Kestrel dared go.

"Anyone hurt?" Kestrel asked.

"A bumped nose." Corbo helped Livia sit up. "How will we get back then?"

"They'll expect us to go north. We are going south with you both. We can make roads if we have to."

"What about fuel?"

"We use a combination of solar and other fuel. However, the solar connections can't be too sandy, or they corrode. Then, we need fuel. Hope to find more at Out of Africa."

"Were those people from there?" Livia smoothed her hair.

"Probably not. Good thing you hid. These raiders are everywhere, breaking into homes and businesses. Sadly, I almost hope they meet your old friends, E-Coli and botulism."

Everyone laughed.

Corbo checked his gun, and made sure it was ready if they needed it. He hoped not. There was no telling what they might find at Out of Africa. Fresh, live, previously well-fed meat, trapped in cages, without trucked in specialty foods. A recipe for raiders. If they only knew. If there were this many raiders here, how many might lurk there?

Chapter 29

Fort Sill, to Tuttle Oklahoma

Amber held Tam on one side and Joe on the other. She hadn't let them out of her sight since she returned from the Meers Fault.

Her hands and head had been banged around as they raced back from the quake damaged area. It may have been a magnitude 7, or more. As her head had cleared, she worried about Tam and Joe. She didn't dare not return, when she had promised them she would.

She held on to them as tight as she could now. That memory, or fear that they would be abandoned, brought a tear to her eye. Now, they were riding in a military convey, going to Tuttle, Oklahoma, and beyond.

Tam snuggled up to her, holding Amber's Ring of Fire pillowcase. "Where are we?"

Amber smoothed the pillowcase across her lap. Brandon had always expected her to explain to him how she knew the geologic facts of an area. An aching pain of the memory of those last "teaching" moments in the California fault, only a few months ago. She could explain it to him. Could she explain it to a four-year-old with no science knowledge? "Where we are isn't on this map."

She pointed to the middle of Oklahoma as the vehicle bounced on the rough roads. "We are about here. I need to update my map. Maybe we can soon. If we have a chance to rest."

"Where are we going?" Tam looked up at her.

Amber hugged her close. "We have to check out a few towns. Be sure the people there are safe from the earthquake. Did it scare you?"

Tam nodded and touched the threads on Amber's pillowcase, tracing the lines that were slowly falling out. "Where will the new x's go?"

Amber pointed out a few places. "I think we have a line over here, in Arizona. And, several new ones in New Mexico. The Rio Grande Rift valley is splitting, forcing us northeastward. Not fun while the plates move."

"Plates move?"

Amber laughed. "I keep forgetting; you didn't have geologic scientists around you." She leaned back and closed her eyes. How to explain to a four-year-old, and not be too far off? An idea surfaced. She hugged Tam close. "Plates are like eggshells, you know those?"

Tam smiled.

"Okay, if a shell cracks, what happens?"

"Move apart."

"Good. Let me see the pillow case for a minute."

Amber took the case, smoothed some areas, and bunched up others. She showed Tam how when one not to scale plate moved, it would create mountains and plains where they weren't before.

Joe reached across and pointed at the "mountains" as she showed them what it meant.

Amber didn't know if they would remember it, or if they even understood. The example wasn't even exactly scientifically correct. Not that it could be in a bouncing vehicle. Enough of an explanation to clarify to them now, and teach the finer points later, much later.

Alex laughed. "My dad would be embarrassed. That sounds so simplified."

"They don't know all the terms and facts we do. It's a start. How much did you know at their age?"

"No idea. Shouldn't you wait until they are old enough to understand it all?"

She took his hand and gazed deeply into his eyes. "No. There may not be anyone to explain it to them. They may never have the education we got. When we were their age, earthquakes, and volcanoes were all history. These children. They are their present. They deserve to know the forces that took their family."

"And if we aren't there to better explain it in more depth later, and they remember today's version, it will create a simplified future view of earthquakes and volcanoes. Pele rises again."

Amber laughed. "Guess so. Do you have a better solution?"

"Not at the moment. I'll let you know when I come up with one."

"We will be at Tuttle in a few minutes," Monty, the driver said. "Everyone should be gone, except a small band of Choctaw who gathered to remember the town founders before the massive quake. They decided to stay and guard the town. Though, I'm not sure they could leave."

"Why's that?" Amber asked.

"It was mostly older women and a few children, left behind for a

loom festival."

"Oh, neat. Maybe they can fix the pillowcase." Tam shouted.

"We will see," Amber said. "We may be rescuing them, and taking them back with us. Think there's room?"

"No. At the base, sure. They don’t want to go there with the growlies there."

Amber groaned.

Alex laughed. "See what I mean?"

"They're children. Of course they'll say that. She probably already called it that before I told her, didn't you?"

Tam nodded.

They entered the tiny abandoned town. Most of the legal inhabitants were long gone. Those few left were strangers, and had no way home. This would be interesting.

The dusty truck windows didn't give a good impression of the town. There was a chance there might be raiders hiding in town. All Amber could see was dust and dirty doorsteps. The quakes had occurred during the hot summer months. Plate motion combined with abandoned, dusty fields created up drafts of air lifting dirt and sand, and spread it far across the country. She had read about the Dust Bowl, and had never thought she would live to see it recreated.

It was a small town, and in a few minutes, they reached the local elementary school. Several young children ran and shouted among the swings and slides. None sat alone on the sidelines.

Tam and Joe clapped and bounced around in the seat ready to join them. "Can we?" They begged.

"I guess you can go for a few minutes. We will talk to the adults resting in the shade," Amber said.

Tam and Joe jumped out, shouted. They ran for the swings. The other children turned as one, to stare. Tam and Joe joined them. The boys and girls clapped and grabbed their hands. They danced in a circle singing a tune Amber didn't quite recognize, though it reminded her of nights in quaint South American villages when she was only a few years older than Tam.

Amber covered her mouth as she giggled. "Two little blond heads in a raven sea. What a sight."

Alex hugged her as he helped her out. "The exercise will be good for them. At least they're happy." He took her hand, and they walked to the adults resting beside the once school building.

The people, dressed in their native style, worked on small handicrafts, while the children played.

Amber strolled forward, trying to determine who was the leader of this group. She glanced along the line at each of the seven adults. "Hello."

One woman worked a small weaving loom. "Good afternoon."

Connecting with these people would take a little time. Their comfort level was important to maintain. She glanced back at Tam and Joe. They played well with the other children, fully included, and including.

A young child, a few years older than Tam ran up. "Are you here to rescue us?"

The older woman put her hand out on the child's shoulders. "Do you need rescuing?"

"No, just food."

The older woman laughed as the child ran back to play. "They will soon learn as their ancestors did. They will forget all they have never known. It will be like a bad dream."

"You want to stay here?" Amber shuffled her toes in the sand. They had so much here, and the evacuation camps were in danger too.

"For now. The future is in the past. The past will bring us to the future, and lead us back to our once fertile land."

Alex sat down in front of the woman. "You think the future is here."

"There is food. There is shelter. The children will learn to make their own. Our skills will be highly valued. Being able to create clothing, shelter, and food utensils are the basic building blocks of human life. We know them. Many do not."

Alex shifted to sit more like the woman beside him. "Most people buy them."

One of the elders said, "Where is your money now? With no electricity, you have no money. Paper money has been rare for a long time. And without people to make the basic building blocks of life, or transportation to bring them to you, how would you buy them?"

The elder was right. Without electricity, plastic couldn't be accepted, and there wasn't enough printed paper money to meet the demands anymore.

These people could take care of themselves. They would raise these children well. Prosperity, of a more valuable type, would return to a people who had known suffering for generations. Many people a few years ago, even a few months ago, would consider life like this,

with everything they needed, the ability to fend for themselves, and nothing extra, pure poverty.

"Is there anything we can do for you?" Amber asked.

"I think you have a question to ask, and that's not it."

Amber stepped back. Could this woman read what was deep in her heart? "I know I should ask if I can leave Tam and Joe here with you." She glanced out at the children playing. The children had gathered together, and were now playing tag, even if it was little different than the way she remembered.

"I don't think I can. I don't know if it's best to leave them, or take them with me. I know I'm young. I don't want to abandon them. That last quake scared them, and me."

"You are wise. Perhaps, your children will help you. Care for them, and they will care for you."

Amber sat down in front of the woman and held out her hands. "Are you sure you don't need anything. There are no young adults here to help you."

"Yes, physical strength. The children have that. By the time we need more, they will have grown and we will be gone. They will never know anger, or abuse by others. They will have no bad habits ingrained upon them by suffering adults."

The woman picked up a piece of woven material. It was a little larger than a placemat. "Here, take this with you. Let it be a reminder of what we're trying to build."

Amber accepted the gift. "We will go then, if you don't need anything. Take care."

"And if the power comes back on?" Alex said.

The second elder responded, "Then we will go back to the way it has been for over a hundred years."

She rubbed her moist eyes. Tam and Joe deserved children to play with. Maybe she and Alex should stay here with them. Dena expected her back in Elmore City after their mission was complete. Tam and Joe could play with Danny and the other children there.

She hoped these people would never have to go back to the way they had lived for the last one to two hundred years. No one should have to feel that the skills of thousands of years had no meaning. Their values should be elevated to the high standards they deserved, rather than downtrodden.

Amber held up the gift the woman had given her. The colors of red and yellow had meaning to these people. There were even a few strings of brown.

"Can you explain the meaning of the color choice to me?"

"The meaning of the gift from me is a personal one. To you, it has a similar importance, though you do not know it. Share your understanding with your children. It will evolve as all cultures do," the woman said.

"What if we want two cultures to evolve together? Won't they need to, to survive in the future?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps a few cultures will come together in another generation or two, and combine sharing their ways, with none becoming dominant. They will work together. Now go. We will teach our children to make the patterns, the clothes, the ropes, and to work with clay as their ancestors did."

"I think we need to learn it too," Amber said.

The woman smiled. "You may come and bring children next spring if you can. Learning the skills you need for the future."

"Thank you." Amber didn't have a gift to give this woman. Though no material gift could be as valuable as the one given. The greatest gift she could give was to raise Tam and Joe to be self-sufficient, and able to support the community using the skills that had been reviled for generations.

Tam and Joe gently pushed two girls the same age on the swing set while a group of boys ran around the playground equipment. Something those children's children would never know, as the equipment would rust away in a generation. "Tam, Joe, come along. It's time to go."

The children flew toward her, flushed, and full of energy.

She helped them into the vehicle. The other two vehicles prepared to go as well. They hadn't needed the extra soldiers here. They would, at the next place they expected to find people, El Reno.

Chapter 30

Union City, El Reno, Okarche, Oklahoma

Alex handed Tam and Joe salted peanuts to eat as they settled into the uncomfortable seats. He covered them with a blanket. "Rest. We've a long ride."

Tam and Joe's eyes closed.

He reached for Amber's hand and smiled.

Monty slowed the vehicle.

Alex craned his neck to view the scenery through the small window.

"We've reached the river before Union City. I'm not sure about the bridge." Monty said. "It shifted east."

"Can we drive through the river without getting stuck?" Amber asked.

"Let's check."

Alex and Amber stepped out, and walked down to the embankment. It was steep, too steep to drive safely. A thin stream swirled in the simmering August heat. It had been a mighty river. Now, it glimmered, thick and wet, like quicksand. He didn't trust it. The bridge spanned the open, once mighty river, without noticeable cracks underneath. It appeared stable enough.

The vehicle they were in could be too heavy.

"Guess we'll have to do what we did before. You wake Tam and Joe. Follow me, and then the drivers can come across. I don't know what else to do, except turn back."

Amber squeezed his hand, kissed his cheek, and walked back.

He longed to be able to sit and watch her walk. Her grace and ease of motion was refreshing. Fluid and peaceful, unlike the recent jerky motions of the planet.

Alex searched for a branch to use as a stability pole. He had long ago lost the one he had made in the relative safety of Kilauea.

At the bridge he waited until Amber, Tam, and Joe stood beside him. He took Joe's hand. "Come along and help. If you see any cracks let me know."

"Shall we sing the song?" Tam asked.

"Hum it quietly. Don't sing, and don't dance. Tiptoe across as if

stepping between hen's eggs." Alex gripped the branch and touched the edge of the bridge. He took the first step onto the bridge.

Joe pulled on his arm. The boy's head bobbed as he glanced all over the bridge. He pointed out lizards and even a scorpion or two hiding in the shadows on the edge of the bridge.

Not all of the animals were alive. A few were shells from bird meals. A turtle ambled toward the side they had left.

Much like the bridge in New Mexico, this bridge was long. A few cracks were visible. None appeared to make the road too dangerous to cross. Yesterday's earthquake could have caused damage that wouldn't be visible from the top of the bridge.

The branch tapped the road off the actual bridge. Alex breathed a sigh of relief as he, Amber, Joe, and Tam walked on a little further, and stood off to the side of the road. They waited silently as Monty picked his way across the bridge. Their driver made it.

The soldiers walked slowly across the bridge in pairs. Once they were all across, the second vehicle waited a few minutes, then drove across. So far, so good.

The third vehicle drove across. It was almost four vehicle lengths away when they heard a loud crack. The vehicle shot forward as a middle section of the bridge crashed down to the dry riverbed.

Alex tightened his grip on Amber and Joe's hands as dust billowed up out of the river bottom.

No one moved until the driver came to a stop beyond them.

Alex exhaled. That had been a narrow escape. The bridge may have been safe for a regular vehicle. Perhaps not an armored vehicle. They would have to find another way back to Fort Sill. Even the heat of summer would not dry out the moist riverbed enough to drive the vehicles through it to return to Fort Sill from this direction.

Before long, they were back on the road. The quick passage through Union City was uneventful. No people were in the streets. Dust covered the streets and buildings. The short drive to El Reno was quiet; everyone was deep in thought. They passed several small reservoirs of water, and saw no one, nor any large animals.

"Almost there," Monty said. "Tam, Joe, you'll have to stay close. I wish we had left you in Tuttle for safety."

"No. We wouldn't be able to return to them," Amber said.

Monty laughed. "I know. This is not a safe place for children."

"Children can warm a hardened heart, sometimes."

"In normal times, perhaps." Monty turned west. "These days, I wouldn't be so sure."

It wasn't wise for any of them to be visiting a federal prison. Especially now with food, water, and power so limited. Of course, Corporal Puma had no one else to send. So it was the volcano and earthquake specialists he had sent, along with two armored vehicles full of soldiers.

The federal prison at El Reno had a backup generator. Last Corporal Puma heard, it worked. They hoped it still did. Radio contact had been lost after the last quake. Most of the soldiers in the second two vehicles would stay behind as relief soldiers. Several who had been sent earlier, were expected to return to base.

The massive gate appeared in front of them. Two armed soldiers waited. Monty pulled up and spoke to one of the soldiers at the gate.

"Hello Stanley, how is it in there?"

"Not good Monty. Food and water are low. Morale can't be much better."

"How long until your soldiers are ready to trade out?"

"Better bring the new ones in first. Let them get acquainted. This is one big complex. We hoped for more soldiers."

"These were all Corporal Puma could spare. In fact, there are only ten relief soldiers. I'm sorry. I have two scientists, and two children with me, as well."

Stanley's shoulders slumped.

There weren't enough soldiers for him to take a break, and perhaps go home as well. If he had a home to go to.

He nodded to the other soldier, and sprung the gate open. No one else was in sight.

As the vehicles rolled inside the gate, Alex's stomach knotted. He wasn't sure about bringing Amber and the children here. They wouldn't be able to escape if something went wrong. The gates clanged shut behind the vehicles.

"Amber, I want you to take Tam and Joe, and wait outside the gates. I'm worried." If they didn't go now, they might not be able to.

"In this heat?" Amber helped Tam and Joe out. "They'd bake. There's no shade."

Heat rose in waves off the stone grey pavement in the empty parking lot. "Stay here then. In the shade of the vehicles. They don't need you to go in there." Their safety was more important than his.

"We'll walk along the fences to check for damage. The bushes will offer some protection from the sun." Amber pulled her backpack close and walked away with the two chatterboxes.

Tam glanced back at him and waved.

He smiled and waved before he joined the soldiers.

"Okay, we have to hurry. The people you are replacing need to be back on the road soon, and out of town before dark," said Stanley. "I'll stay here."

The soldiers marched to the first imposing building.

Alex trailed behind. Corporal Puma had sent him more as a clerk to verify the trade went well, and to determine if more help was needed at the prison.

At the door, the second guard stopped. "The reservoirs are holding out for now. We are rationing water. The generator is working, at partial capacity. With growing some of our own food, and with the reservoirs, we hope to make it through until civilization returns. The soldiers you are replacing are down these main halls. The guards inside will point you where to go."

The guard watched the soldiers go in, and glanced back at the gate frequently. Only Stanley was visible at the gate now.

There should be at least two guards there, with one extra to have walked with them, and wait on the soldier exchange.

Something crashed, dragging him out of his thoughts. Shouts echoed inside, and a gun fired.

"Can you do anything?" The guard yelled to Alex.

Alex shook his head.

The guard rushed inside.

Alex ran after him. He had a gun, and a few bullets. Corporal Puma hadn't been able to find any more ammunition for his weapon.

Inside, the shouts echoed through the halls.

Several soldiers held back a group of maybe seven, or eight, men in prison uniforms. Other soldiers tried to come in behind with handcuffs.

The noise and low lighting levels didn't help. Chairs were scattered across the floor. Someone shouted over the melee, as the sounds grew louder, ringing out of the lobby, and down the hallways. One soldier pointed a tazer at an inmate.

Alex stood rooted to the spot. Should he run and protect Amber, maybe shouting for more soldiers, hiding somewhere? Should he shoot if one came toward him?

The lights flickered, and went out.

Screams echoed.

Then silence.

Alex was next to the door. He knew where the handle was. If he escaped now, maybe he could save Amber and the children. He

reached for the knob and almost turned it.

"Don't," Someone said from nearby. "We are all locked in now. Wouldn't want them stampeding out."

Chapter 31

Out of Africa, Arizona

Livia shifted on the uncomfortable seat. Those raiders had unnerved her. If there were more at Out of Africa, she would have to be careful. Most animals were easy to work with, except humans, or recently domesticated animals, gone wild. It had always been fun to be the one kid the adults had trusted around the trick ponies, and show tigers. Show training would come in handy now. If the tigers she met tonight were trained the same way she had known, and would respond to the commands of someone they didn't know, she'd be safe no matter how many raiders arrived.

"Careful," Corbo said.

"Huh?" Livia realized her flailing hands had hit him in the face. Practicing the gestures used to grab the attention of the tigers in such close quarters was not safe.

"Sorry. Trying to remember how to talk to tigers."

Corbo laughed. "As long as you tell them to stay away from me."

"Or protect you." She took his hand, kissed it, and gazed into his eyes. "I wouldn't want any mean old raiders to hurt you. You're all I have."

Corbo leaned back.

He didn't like that kind of attention. Reminding him he was all she had was the only way she knew to hold his heart close. He didn't want her, or anyone else either. Though it stung, if he would let her, she would do her best to provide him a life, and children. Together, they'd build the family she always wanted; children with many siblings, and attentive parents. Even if they did have to learn to live as their ancestors had.

"We'll be there in a few minutes," Kestrel said. "We have no idea what we'll find. A few handlers stayed, for a while at least."

He turned into the oversized, empty parking lot. Dust, and a few weeds, scattered around. A car with no tires and its hood up, rusted by the thin-railed wooden fence. This fence wouldn't hold animals in, or out.

Kestrel parked near the middle of the empty lot, and they all got out. They crept forward, listening for any sounds of humans.

Her heart beat loudly, and her veins pulsed from the pressure. She took a deep a breath to calm her nerves. A broken piece of the wooden fence in front of them would make a tentative weapon.

They reached the open gate.

Livia took a deep breath.

Corbo pulled ahead.

She tugged his hand back, and put her finger to her lips.

He frowned, and waited.

Livia got down on her hands and knees and crawled forward. She peeked around the fence. No one was visible, so she inched forward.

Several buildings obscured her view. No people in sight. No animals, either. Silence prevailed. The community of animals may have already been emptied.

The building to her right was small. One to her left was large, and the one in the distance, equally large. Housing many animals, this park required many paid volunteers to care for all of them. If only a few had been left behind, they could be anywhere in the park.

She stood up, and motioned to Corbo and the soldiers to follow.

They side step walked to the tightly shuttered smaller building on the left. Kestrel, and the other soldiers, wielded weapons of various sorts, guns, rocks, and sticks to scare animals or raiders.

A rattle from the building's shade startled her. She jumped back. A rattlesnake's head peeked out from behind a rock. There was a slight unnatural glisten, so she stepped a bit closer. Sure, enough, it was a prop intended to startle visitors when they walked too close.

Livia almost laughed. This situation was too serious to make light of. A fake snake rattle could draw a real one in, now that the park was deserted. She didn't want to take any chances, even if they wouldn't normally be out in the heat of the day.

"Hello," a voice said.

She spun to face the voice as she raised the broken fence piece.

A woman dropped the bucket she was carrying, and lifted her hands. "Peace, please."

Livia lowered the board. "Are you a keeper here?"

"I'm Valarie, and Harvey is nearby. We aren't open for public tours."

"I wish we could have come when you were open. We are here to check on the keepers left behind, and the animals," Livia said.

Valarie sat the bucket down. "The news isn't good. Two other keepers left to check on a few other local wildlife refuges. They left a

month ago. We haven't heard from them."

Livia wanted to reach out to the woman, all alone with those raiders nearby. "Have you had any trouble? How are the animals?"

Tears trickled down Valarie's cheeks. "Best I show you." She picked up her bucket, and went toward the building on the left.

"We moved a bunch of the small animals here for safekeeping. Not sure how many will survive at this rate, and many have become food for other animals, it's all part of the chain of life." Valarie opened the door.

Livia followed, with Corbo right behind her. The odor was noxious, almost knocking them backward. Feathers floated in the dim light from the open door. Skylights had been hastily knocked through the ceiling, to let in a little light and fresh air. They were covered by what looked like screen doors and bolts of material, or maybe paper, to keep the animals in.

"We have feed animals behind that door. Birds over here. Not all of them made it."

"Which ones didn't?"

Valarie smiled oddly, as she pointed at a few empty labeled cages, "What we call the volcano canaries now. The gasses got them. They couldn't fly away to safety."

Valarie sat her bucket down on the floor. "Trying to decide when, and how, to air it out was tough once the first few died. Some are sickly now. They are alive, for the moment."

"That's a lot of trauma for a bird who can't see what's happening, or do anything to protect themselves," Corbo said.

"It's more complex than that as well. You'd think the snakes would be happy. They're not. We aren't sure if more is coming, or what."

"They're restless?" Corbo said.

"It's almost scary. Harvey wants to release them. I think it's too dangerous. They wouldn't live long out there on their own. And they might hurt or kill people, if anyone ever comes back."

Snakes slithered on the glass sides of cages piled in a corner, looking for a way out. Giant snakes, longer than the three of them combined were in one large exhibit labeled "African Parrots." Cardboard boxes separated them, though that certainly wouldn't stop them from reaching each other.

"Do you think they will?" Livia reached her hands to the woman's shoulders.

"No." Tears streaked down Valarie's dusty face. "I think it will be

too bad. Something else is coming. I'm sure. I dream about it. Harvey tries to reassure me, it won't."

They had a lot to do, and not much time. She reached her arm out to Valarie. "Come on, what about the bigger animals?"

"We've moved them all closer. The lions and tigers are guarding the other animals. And us at night."

Valarie led the way out of the building, back into the intense sunlight.

The smell out here was fresh baked rock and sand. A relief. Livia took a deep breath to clear her lungs. "It's overpowering."

Valarie nodded. "And abuse. If power doesn't come back soon, we will have to release them, or they may all die of disease. We can't keep them anywhere else right now. It's tough enough taking care of them here."

She led the way further into the park pointing out the buildings. "We pulled pieces from that one when it crumpled. The quakes did a lot more damage here than anyone would have suspected. The buildings weren't up to quake code, I guess."

Some of the buildings looked as if they would collapse any minute. Walls leaned, roofs partially caved in. Sand and dust had made small mounds next to the smaller buildings, helping hold them up. Larger buildings stood more solid, perhaps constructed at an earlier time, of better materials. Livia wouldn't trust them either.

They walked on down the dirt path, past trams that would never run again.

"There's enough fuel to drive them to the buildings. I doubt it would help them stand up."

"Not enough to leave?" Livia asked.

"No. We have nowhere to go. This place has been my family. My home for years. It's all Harvey and I have."

They reached a small outbuilding. It leaned sideways, a dilapidated shed, more than a building. The whole place had an air of neglect. The sandy, bushy terrain reminded her of the dusty, dry, empty desert all around them. The animals were fenced in with few options for finding locally available food or water.

As they walked up to the fence, a few animals lounging nearby lifted up their heads, and swiveled to see the people. A few giraffe, zebras, ostriches, antelope, and other grazers were all crowded in a small grassless pen together.

Behind a split fence, with fresh mounds of dirt holding it in place, were the predators. Lions and tigers napped in one section. Wolves

and hyenas lazed in the other. A man leaned on a shovel next to a pair of wolves.

"No hope Valarie. There isn't any water left. I have no idea where the water table is here, if there even is one below us."

One wolf tottered over to him, tongue lolling, and collapsed at his feet.

Valarie leaned against the grazer's fence.

All of the animals were thinner than they should be, and their tongues lolled. Grazers rested, not bothering to stand and eat the few remaining shoots as afternoon edged into early evening.

"We have one option left. Early morning, I guess we'll release the animals." Harvey nibbled a handful of peanuts.

"Where will they find water?" Corbo asked.

Harvey walked to the new fencerow. "We can take them to the swimming pool. There's some water left there. It'll be sad to see them go."

A soldier tossed a small rock at a fallen tree. "Wouldn't it be better to let them go at night, when they can travel further in cooler air?"

"It would be better for them. We don't have any guards. Unless you want to stay," Harvey said.

"It's our duty to see to the welfare of the people, and the animals."

Harvey waved his hand at the starving animals. "You can see they are starving, and dying of thirst. If we let them go, a few might stand a chance, if they can revert to instincts."

Livia drained her water bottle. "It's sad to think of the animals who had been raised by people released into the wild with no one to protect them." It was far better to give them a chance than to watch them starve in pens. Maybe a few would survive, and populate the plains with lions, tigers, and even zebras for future generations. If surviving humans didn't eat them all first.

"At last no motor vehicles will run them down, or confuse them," Harvey said. "With few humans in the area, they might be able to learn from other wild animals."

"We'll help release them," Livia said. "About dusk we can herd the carnivores out and encourage them to go north. Let them begin their journeys. In the middle of the night, we can take the grazers out. Try to steer them southwest. There may be grazing grounds that way."

Harvey waved, picked up his shovel, and walked back toward

the buildings.

"He'll join us soon. These animals have been around people all their lives. I hope they can survive." Valarie wiped her eyes and brow.

The animals rested in what shade they could find.

"They are sturdy enough. They should do fine. As long as they can reproduce, they will add to our country's growing population of wild things. Maybe it's what the endangered species need," Corbo said.

"Some can reproduce. Others have been spayed or neutered. It was the right thing to do at the time," Valarie said.

Livia closed her eyes. Spaying and neutering had once seemed like such a good idea for overpopulation, both for animals and humans. One reason she, Nathan, and Josie had kept so busy helping the illegal immigrants. To be kept perpetually without a family was be a nightmare she never wanted to face.

Spayed females, especially the cats, would never have their brains mature in certain ways, ways that would protect them from harm on the plains they would now face. As for the males, they could lose their feeling of purpose in life. Some would live, would some die, while many would be eaten by starving humans.

The evening sun drifted toward the horizon in the August heat. Predators became restless, and eyed the grazers differently than they had earlier in the day.

One of the antelope it staggered to its feet, let out a call, and came closer to the small group of humans huddled next to the falling apart feeding structure.

Lions roared. Tigers paced. Wolves and hyenas howled.

Shivers crept up Livia's spine.

"They are getting hungry," Harvey said. "They've never hunted before. Now, they want to go after an antelope they've known since their births. The horses are in another pen, time to bring them here and release the hungry lions."

Harvey returned with the three transport trained horses. He would ride as bait for the predators, leading them away from the grazers.

Corbo and Livia rode behind the fenced in predators to help drive them after Harvey. There had been a little time to plan a course of action. Her circus training would make all the difference now, in their lives, and the lives of all the park animals.

Zebras not used to be ridden, ran up to greet the horses.

Livia shooed them away.

Kestrel, and most of the soldiers, grabbed pieces of the fallen wood from the shelter, and followed behind Livia and Corbo.

Wolves and hyenas were first to be turned loose. A few well-thrown rocks startled them in the direction they were supposed to go. At the pool, the wolves drank deeply. Hyenas cackled and capered as they drank the dirty water.

Lions roared in the distance. It was an eerie echo.

Wolves bounded off, in the opposite direction of the lion's roars.

Hyenas cackled, and shoved each other into the direction of the lion's roar. They too trotted off on their own into the coming night.

As second trip brought the lions and tigers to the pool. It was an uneasy, noisy scene, as the animals watched each other drink. Before long, they ambled off in different directions. Lions and tigers swatted each other before they ambled off separately.

The people rested at the once polar bear swimming pool for a bit. That one-third of a mile each way, while chasing semi-tame animals had added up. Closer to three quarters of a mile twice, and one-third of a mile ride back.

"The lions and tigers may interbreed if they go off together," Corbo said.

"It's happened before," Livia said. "Most people think the offspring can't reproduce."

"We don't know for sure," Valarie said. "Generally, they are sterilized. Or kept apart from others, both lions, and tigers. We may end up with a new species or two, in a century or more."

"Ligons are the same size and build as the extinct American lion. Perhaps, they will come back," Harvey said.

"Better get the rest of the animals." Livia hobbled over to the horse she had ridden.

Harvey turned his horse for the last roundup of the night. "We'll race back and herd the grazers this way."

It had taken all the soldiers to move the lions and tigers. Grazers had been left on their own. If the raiders had followed them, some of the grazers might be food already.

Corbo and Livia raced behind him.

Valarie and the soldiers would catch up with them when they could.

They raced as fast as they dared go.

Barking dogs broke the evening stillness. The closer they got, the sound of barking dogs increased.

She didn't remember seeing dogs earlier in the day. The upcoming scene could pet dogs gone wild, or raiders with dogs.

Chapter 32

Out of Africa to Phoenix, Arizona

Corbo raced his horse on ahead as the dogs barked louder. The stars and moon shone enough to see the ground ahead. Horse hooves pounded the dusty track.

Other sounds began to permeate the air. Stampeding and bellowing hoofed animals, with nowhere to go. He had almost reached the enclosure when he saw the commotion at the fence, close to where they had sat and ate, hours before.

The herds bellowed, dogs barked, and a crash rang through the night. The sound of pounding hooves raced away. Corbo's tired mount could not catch up. Soon, Livia and Harvey were beside him.

In moments, they reached the shattered gate.

The barking dogs were near.

Banging, pounding, and bird screeches echoed around the barks. They glanced at each other, and pushed the tired horses toward the entrance. Dogs wouldn't normally go after birds. Saving the caged animals was what mattered now.

They caught up with the barking dogs at the first building. Birds screeched and screamed. Dogs tried to break in the door. One had jumped on some piles of something, and climbed to the roof.

Corbo jumped off. The ground felt unsteady. He had been on a horse for hours, so that didn't surprise him. He took one step forward.

The ground began to rumble.

His horse neighed, and jumped back.

Livia and Harvey's horses took off toward the now open corral.

Corbo moved backwards, trying to stay out of the way.

Rumbling grew louder.

Buildings began to shake.

His damaged knee buckled under him.

The dogs stopped barking. They cowered, and howled.

One big dog, who hadn't been wild long, ran directly into Corbo, knocking him backwards several feet. The dog then sat on his legs.

The ground shook violently.

The wall in front of Corbo shifted in, and out, like an accordion.

With one final twist inward, it fell, right at his feet.

He screamed as the ground vibrated from the falling wall.

Birds screeched louder as cages tumbled apart. A few had escaped their cages, and burst into the air.

Corbo was unable to move, while the ground shook. The tremor finally stilled, and the big dog jumped off his legs and bounded off with the other dogs toward the wreckage of the building.

There was little hope of saving any birds that had not escaped. In the dark, they wouldn't be able to see to do so. It was too dangerous anyway. The walls could fall on them, trapping them underneath, with no hope of rescue.

Galloping hooves echoed through the night.

Livia and Harvey rode up beside him.

"Are you okay?" Livia asked.

Corbo nodded, and then realized she might not be able to see a nod. "I'll be fine. My leg is sore. One of the dogs saved me. Dr. Rebecca, or Amber, would know what the magnitude of that quake was."

Debris from the falling buildings shifted as the noisy dogs searched for dead and dying birds to eat. Living birds circled overhead and screeched. Another crash sounded as some distant building finished its descent to the ground.

"I don't think that building was in the park," Harvey said. "Lots of office buildings are nearby. It may have been one of them."

A few moments later, the soldiers caught up with them.

"Are you all okay?" Kestrel asked.

"Okay," Corbo said. "Let's go. If you can safely see the road."

"What about the horses?" Livia had gotten off her horse; and wrapped her arms around Valarie when arrived and saw the destruction.

"They can find safety. They can see better than us." Harvey reached for the buckle on the bridle to loosen it.

Valarie reached up and grabbed the horse's mane. "I don't want to let them go. We've lost everything else."

Harvey pulled her close to him and whispered. "We have each other. We will find more people and be safe. We did everything we could."

"We've lost our papers. Our identification, everything. They were in the bird house."

"So have millions of others. We are alive. Let's go with Corbo and Livia. Help them on whatever their quest is." Harvey hugged

Valarie close, and she let go of the horse's bridle.

The three horses snorted, and raced off together in the direction the other herds had gone.

He might not be alone anymore. People everywhere would be without proof of who they were, and how long they had lived here. Even without a birth certificate, he might now be able to apply for citizenship of the only country he had ever known.

They walked to the vehicles in the parking lot. It would be a long, hard drive. Harvey and Valarie crowded into the front vehicle with Corbo and Livia. He didn't mind. They could sleep, and the soldiers could drive.

"What should be a half hour drive will be much longer. We need a short nap. We should be safe in here." Kestrel turned to doze.

Corbo held Livia close. In this crazy new world, he'd have to take care of her as much as she took care of him. He thought he would stay awake.

The first rays of sunlight peeked in the front window. His knee ached, more pain from the fall last night.

Livia's head nestled on his shoulder.

He lifted the hair from her eyes.

She mumbled, and then pulled away.

Before long they were on the road. Or, what was left of a road. Asphalt was pitted and marked with long, deep cracks. Heavy-duty tires allowed them to dodge the largest ruts, and keep going.

An hour passed, and they reached the first town, an apparently deserted hamlet. Sand and dirt covered the road. A few dogs rested in the shade of the buildings, tongues already lolling from the heat wave.

They passed the town. Kestrel glanced back at them. "About half-way to Phoenix now. We'll stop at the Phoenix Zoo. See how they are doing, and then go on."

The soldier beside him glanced at Livia and back at Kestrel.

With a hand motion, Kestrel turned back to the road.

Kestrel wasn't saying something.

Corbo's heart fluttered. What was this trip really about?

Livia's hand touched his knee.

Focusing on her wasn't easy. His feared they might be dumped without fuel, vehicle, or rations somewhere in the desert.

A few miles down, Kestrel stopped. "Let's take a short break. Girls, over there by those low bushes, watch for snakes."

Corbo followed him back to where the other soldiers stood.

Harvey had stayed behind with the women.

"This next town is basically a suburb of Phoenix. No telling what we may meet. Be prepared for anything. We are low on fuel. There should be some fuel at the reactor, if nowhere sooner."

They chose some food from the packs and climbed back in. Corbo's hands trembled as he ate. He held Livia close. The quakes were maddening, and who knew what damage they had done in this area. They were running from the volcanoes, the most fractured part of the state, and straight to a nuclear reactor. Anything could happen.

"I see a cloud of smoke," Kestrel said.

Corbo held Livia tighter.

"Be prepared."

Corbo reached for his gun. "Is the radio working?"

Kestrel checked the radio in the vehicle. Nothing. Not even static.

Corbo's shoulders slumped. It was too late to turn back. If the reactor, or downtown, was on fire; either, would be devastating. The column of smoke rose, and drifted on the light upper atmospheric breeze. He gripped the gun until his knuckles turned white.

Chapter 33

El Reno, to Kingfisher Oklahoma

Amber, Tam, and Joe sat by the tree in what little shade there was. Twigs and leaves on the cracked ground were toys for the moment. All they had now, and perhaps for many years to come.

Alex walked off with the soldiers, and stood by the door.

Amber only partially paid attention to the children between her and Alex.

A crash and gunshot resounded out the prison door.

Tam and Joe rushed to her arms.

Alex ran inside the door.

Amber stood up and pulled Tam and Joe closer.

Moments passed. He didn't come back out. Something was wrong.

"Stanley."

Stanley walked up to her. "I can't leave my post."

Amber glanced at the gate. "It's locked?"

"Yes."

"We have to go. Alex wasn't supposed to go in. He hasn't come back out."

He glanced at the door, and stepped back. He pulled out his radio, and pressed the button.

Static.

Then silence.

"Is anyone alive in there?" Stanley spoke into the radio.

Static.

Amber pulled Tam and Joe closer. Her heart beat fast. Scary thoughts fluttered through her mind so fast, she couldn't quite catch them before they were gone. She didn't want anything to happen to Alex. He was her last link to her mom. A tear trickled down her cheek as Tam and Joe tried to wiggle free.

"Here. Lights out. Doors locked." A voice on the radio, cackled.

Stanley's curses rivaled an Egyptian curse catalog.

Amber covered the children's ears. "Can you get them out?"

"We are too short of help. I'm not supposed to leave my post. Everyone else is inside though."

"Can I do it?"

"Highly irregular. Not allowed." Stanley said.

Alex was in danger, as was every other person in there.

"Do they have air in there?"

The man's face went pale. "Without the generators, I'm not sure. It was built tight."

"So, it's an airless tomb. As soon as it runs out of oxygen, they are all dead. I'm going. Tell me what to do."

Amber hugged the children. "Tam, Joe. I need you to stay here. Stay in the shade here, under this tree. Can you do that?" She smoothed each face tenderly with her hand.

Tam nodded and took Joe's hand. He leaned up against her and shivered despite the heat.

"What do I need to do?" Amber waited on Stanley to answer.

"You can't do it alone. I have the code. I'll have to cover you, and the gate both."

Amber glanced to the gate. No people visible. No one nearby either. "Tam and Joe can cover the locked gate. Let's go."

Amber grabbed his hand, and half dragged him to the building.

He pulled away, and hurried to one side. "I'll key in the code. You open the door when I say so. This wasn't supposed to happen. We should have twenty or thirty guards here."

"Well, you don't have them. You have me." Amber tapped her foot waiting on the word.

"Pull."

She closed her eyes and jerked the door open.

Alex fell out into her arms, panting, and red-faced.

Amber held him close a minute, and kissed his forehead.

"Have to. Help others." Alex mumbled.

She rubbed his forehead and glanced in the door. People were strewn as far as the sunlight showed. No visible movement. "No. Let them care for themselves."

No one was coming out on their own. She helped Alex to stand, led him down the steps, and out to a nearby tree. She sat him lightly on the ground and kissed his cheek.

"Stay here. Rest."

He leaned on his side, trying to sit. "Take." He held out the gun.

Amber took the gun and patted his forehead. The walk back to the building was the longest walk she remembered.

Stanley stood in the doorway, mouth drooping as he peered inside.

Her feet hit the steps.

He lifted his right arm. "Stay back. There is no hope."

Sunlight peeked through the door, reminding Amber of a horror movie. People and furniture sprawled in complete disorder. An odor wafted from the building, one that shouldn't be there. Her throat burned the closed she walked. "Are you sure?"

Stanley wet his finger, held it in the air. "Stand over here. Peek in."

Terrified faces met her gaze. Mouths agape, hands clasped around their necks. One man in a prison uniform had managed to grab a guard's backpack. Those closest to him had the most distorted faces.

Amber stepped back. "What happened?"

Stanley stepped to the side. "We have to let it air out. They used up the oxygen too fast."

"Alex survived."

"He was by the door. He may not have known what was happening when the inmate grabbed the tear gas canister. Plus, he was protected by all of the other men," Stanley said.

Amber grabbed a handkerchief out of her pocket. "I've got to try. Stay, or help me."

She covered her nose and mouth with the handkerchief in one hand, and ventured in the doorway. Those furthest away were dead from lack of oxygen, and reactions to the tear gas. Those closest to the door, might be alive, if they had protected their faces.

First, she checked a man who had been closest to Alex. He groaned as she rolled him over, and a radio fell out of his hand and clattered to the ground. Amber waved to Stanley.

He took a deep breath and plunged in. Once he grabbed the man's shoulder's, he dragged him out; bumping his feet down the steps to safety.

Amber moved to the next soldier. She checked his pulse. There might have been a stir, she couldn't tell.

When Stanley came back, she pointed at him, and raised her eyebrow in a questioning manner.

She turned to the next body.

Stanley grabbed the second and pulled him out into the broiling sunshine.

The third person was a pregnant soldier who had pulled her uniform over her face. Underneath, she was breathing, though it was shallow.

Tears rolled down Amber's cheeks. She pointed the woman out to Stanley as he came back to the door.

Stanley took a deep breath, and stepped forward.

Amber jumped, as the woman grabbed her arm.

Stanley grabbed the soldier's arms, and pulled on her.

Amber dropped her handkerchief, and took the woman's legs.

Soon, the few who were alive were waking up on the ground outside. Shade trees had been few, and now they weren't enough. No prisoners had survived.

Tam and Joe had been sent to a small storage area on the side of the building to find buckets of water and spare uniforms. Everyone had to be washed, and clothes changed. The process was slow and tedious, so as not to contaminate the clean clothes, or their eyes and mouths.

There weren't enough guard uniforms to go around. Amber and Alex ended up in prison garb.

Alex laughed as Amber tried to dress him after washing him down good. He could barely sit up.

"What happened?"

"A gas canister went off," Amber said. "And with no air circulation, it was a death trap in minutes."

"I don't remember anything." Alex lifted his hand to his head.

"I imagine not."

"How many made it out?"

"Not enough. Plus, we are in trouble." Stanley pointed to the young woman soldier who groaned and grasped her sides.

Alex glanced at the woman. "Is anyone left alive in there?"

Stanley shook his head. "We have to take her to Kingfisher. She may die. They have doctors there. You all need treatment."

"Amber, bring the children. Stanley, we need you to help us all in the vehicle, and drive us," Alex said.

"I, I can't leave my post."

Alex reached out and grabbed the man's shoulders. "You don't have a post if everyone is dead. Your job now is to save those of us clinging to life."

"I can't. Corporal Puma."

Alex leveled his gaze with the man. "Corporal Puma's orders and mine are the same. He gave me the authority to decide what was best if need be, for the men and women on this expedition. Isn't this what you would do?"

"I'll take your word," Stanley said.

Alex slumped to the ground. "No need. There's a letter in my bag. Catch my breath, then I'll help."

Alex couldn't help much. Fumes overcame him, as well as the rest of them.

Stanley helped load the pregnant woman into the vehicle. They then each took one side of the other two rescued soldiers, helping them up and into the vehicle.

Amber came back one last time for Alex. "You okay?"

"Tired. Need food and water," he said.

She helped him up, and walked to the vehicle with him leaning on her.

"Amber, can you drive?" Stanley asked.

"I need to be back there with her. I don't know the way," Amber said.

"Drive to outside the gate. I have to lock it tight," Stanley said. "I hope I can lock it from outside. If not, I know a way."

Amber had only tried for her permit a few months before they left California. Driving a loaded van shouldn't be that much more difficult than a compact car. At least not through these giant gates meant for delivery vehicles.

She lurched the vehicle forward, almost throwing everyone off their seats.

"Sorry."

Alex groaned. "Here, let me talk you through it."

With Alex and Stanley giving directions, Amber managed to drive through the gate, and park the vehicle.

She climbed in the back with the woman who was in labor. Chances were high her baby would be stillborn.

Tam rubbed the woman's forehead with a damp cloth.

The woman looked up at Amber with crossed worry lines above her eyebrows.

"What's your name?" Amber sat on the vehicle floor, and glanced from Tam to the woman.

"Kelly," the woman said, and then groaned.

Stanley stepped into the vehicle. "It's fifteen miles. I'll go as fast as I dare. How is she?"

Amber glanced up at him. She didn't dare speak.

Alex crawled back to her and checked on Kelly. "Tam, where is your grandmother's quilt?"

Within minutes, they had Kelly undressed, with the quilt spread out under her, and a sleeping bag covering her. Amber held her

hand, and tried to talk to her, to comfort her. It was all she knew to do.

"Baby is all I have." The woman said between breaths. "Husband dead."

Alex pulled Amber close.

The woman panted and tears rolled down her cheek. "Don't let it die."

Amber rubbed Kelly's hand, and checked her dilation, not that she knew that much about it. As a child, she had heard a few women give birth in those remote villages they explored in South America. She had never been in their homes during the process.

"Try to relax. It'll be okay. We'll have you to real doctors soon."

"Too late." Her panting stopped. Kelly screamed.

Amber covered her ears.

"Be there soon. Hold on." Stanley shouted.

Amber held Kelly's hand. "Let your body do it naturally. Listen to it."

Kelly grunted and pushed.

The baby's head peeked out between Kelly's legs.

Amber closed her eyes one-second, and glanced to see where Tam and Joe were. She reached forward. "Kelly, the baby is coming. I will do my best."

Kelly screamed, and pushed.

Amber gritted her teeth as the baby emerged onto the quilt. There was no way it was sanitary. Of course, our ancestors didn't deliver in sanitary situations either, and they survived. It might stay this way, and people would have to learn to live like this.

One more scream, and the baby was almost out. Amber reached for it, hoping that holding the infant would give it some warmth and hope, even if it was already dead. She slipped her hands under the infant, and it slithered out, into her grasp.

Kelly grunted and groaned as Amber laid the bloody, mucus covered infant body onto her chest.

Alex patted the baby's back.

Amber sat back, confused and scared. The baby wouldn't live if no one knew what to do. How many people did know what to do to naturally keep a newborn infant alive? Surely keeping a newborn alive was instinctive. Maybe little girls learned from watching their mother's give birth. None of her education had prepared her for this moment. Not even her own scientific studies of history.

She pulled Tam and Joe close. A human birth was something

they would never have seen a few months ago.

Chapter 34

El Reno, to Kingfisher Oklahoma

Alex held Kelly's hand as she struggled to breath. The pregnancy shouldn't have ended now, or she wouldn't have been at the prison. The baby was premature. How early, he couldn't tell. So much blood was on the quilt, it looked like too much to lose and live.

The vehicle swerved hard to the right.

"Almost there."

It stopped with a jolt that sent Alex on top of the baby, and Kelly. Stanley blasted the horn long, and loud.

The baby cried.

Alex sat up. At least one life was saved. He backed up as Amber tried to help him up.

"Your face is covered in the baby's blood. Take it. Is it a boy, or girl?"

Alex shakily stood, and picked up the baby.

Kelly stared ahead. Her chest didn't rise.

"Girl." He backed out of the walkway.

Amber glanced at Kelly, and her face clouded.

"Come on. We need to leave, so the doctors can help everyone else." Alex turned to Tam and Joe.

They tried to walk through the vehicle littered with belongings.

"Wish we could help," Monty said. "I know your wife is tired."

The words cheered him up. Perhaps he and Amber should marry. Everyone would expect it now. If Kelly didn't live, who would take this baby? And who would feed it? It was doubtful they would find formula these days.

Alex hugged the naked, bloody newborn tightly to his prison garb covered chest.

Three men and a woman rushed out of the building. They stopped when they saw him standing there, naked bloody baby in his arms, children at his side.

"Kelly, in there, needs you." He nodded toward the vehicle.

Alex slid to the ground against a tire.

The baby slid to his lap and clasped his hand.

One of the other soldiers came out and handed him a shirt to

wrap around the infant. The sun was still warm. It would be going down soon. They had to find suitable clothing, shelter, and food for all of them.

Alex leaned back against the tire. It wasn't comfortable. His arms slipped from the baby.

Dizziness enveloped him. A roaring sound disturbed his thoughts. Something. Supposed to be doing something. Everything was dark. He tried to move, and his muscles didn't work. He tried to scream, and couldn't. Soon, the spiraling was out of control.

A pressure on his arm startled him.

"Alex? Alex?"

His eyes opened. A pretty young woman crouched in front of him. It wasn't Amber. He struggled to move his arms and legs.

"Relax. You had a hard day. Be still."

"Amber." He tried to yell. The sound was low and sluggish.

Tam grabbed his hand. "She's busy. Wake up."

The rush of the last few days hit him. He groaned and lifted his hand to his forehead. "Am I going to be okay?"

"You'll be fine. Too much adrenaline, and a rough last few days. This little girl has been telling us what you did," the woman said.

"Girl? Baby girl?"

"She's fine. You did the best you could. When you wake up, we'll help you inside."

The woman tried to stand up.

Alex grabbed her arm as she turned away. "Kelly?"

The woman faced away from Alex, and then bent back down. "Rest, Alex. You did the best you could. No one could have saved her. Even if there had been a hospital at the prison."

The woman stood up and walked into the building.

Tam stayed outside with him.

Alex's eyes rested on her head.

"Everyone else hobbled inside. Someone will be out soon to help you. Joe is with the other men."

Monty had called Amber his wife. He wanted her to be his wife, more than ever now. They would be responsible for three children. Laughing, he tried to sit up more comfortably.

Tom had agreed to care for Karen, Amber's best friend, and her unborn baby. Would Tom ever know that in a few days Alex had managed to scrape up three kids to be a father to?

Was he ready for that? He and Amber should have some time to themselves before kids came along. If Mother Nature ever slowed

down her parade of earthquake and volcanic eruptions, of course.

Two doctors came out and helped Alex to his feet, supporting him as they walked through the open doors.

"You have no idea the fright you gave us, all blood covered in that outfit." One of them helped him lay down on one of the hospital beds.

Alex tried to laugh. "I need to see Amber."

"She'll be here in a minute. We'll take you to her."

"Is she okay?"

"Nothing a little warm tea and some good food won't fix. If only that would work for all of you."

"Will the other soldiers be okay?"

"Sure." The man steered the bed down the hall. "A warm bath, hot food, and a good night's sleep should work. We don't have anything else. Not much else is needed, at least not until now."

Alex's eyes vibrated closed and then opened slowly. The men glanced at each other over the bed. Amber wasn't in trouble. She could escape. He couldn't hold his eyes open any longer.

The air grew denser, and warmer. There was no air circulation here, few windows, and they were all glued shut. The bed bumped to a stop. His eyes opened, and Amber stood in front of him, holding a cup.

He smiled up to her, and tried to reach out. His arm felt like lead.

"Alex, I'm so glad you're safe."

"Why do I feel so bad?"

"You were without oxygen, and that tear gas. Then, all the excitement over the birth. You'll be fine. They are going to give you an IV. You are badly dehydrated. Everyone else got water on the trip here."

A nurse stood beside him. The needle went into his arm, and the bag swung above his head.

His eyes closed.

He woke later to flickering light and stretched out his arm. The IV was gone, and a bandage replaced it. He tried to sit up.

Amber sat at a small table, reading by candle light.

"Air's not bad here."

She looked up, smiled, and brushed her hair back. "Nope. Not bad at all. They broke a bunch of windows so we would have a cross breeze, with none flowing directly into the rooms. It works. Feel okay?"

"Sure. Where are the kids?"

Amber closed the book she was reading and walked over to the hospital bed. "Tam and Joe are asleep on the floor over there. Their quilt is cleaned. It's hanging to dry as a clothes changing line."

She was beautiful. Someone had found a light yellow shirt, and pale blue shorts for her to wear. They had even changed him while he slept. He couldn't see the colors too well in the shade, as she stepped in front of the candle light. She reached over and kissed him.

He drew her closer. "What about the baby?"

Amber kissed his cheek. "The nurse has her. We haven't named her. She should be fine."

"She has no one. So, I guess we will take her. I want to name her."

Amber touched his forehead. "You can. I don't know if I want a third child to care for so soon. You can have her."

Alex pulled her close, tight against him. "Amber, we need to get married. Monty already thinks we're married. We can raise the children together, and maybe even have a few of our own."

She pulled away from him.

"Amber, what's wrong." He tried to sit up on the table bed.

She closed off, crossing her arms on her chest. "Alex, I don't think so."

He pulled her close. "I thought you love me. You know I love you."

She rested her head on his shoulder. After several minutes, she pulled back, and looked deep into his eyes. "Alex, it's a tough world out there. I don't want to have to wonder what happened to you every day."

"You'll always be beside me."

"No, Alex. The world is dangerous, far more dangerous now. It's not like when dad." Her words trailed off.

"What about your dad?"

"Dad got lost on one of our trips. We never found him. Mom stayed for a year. When she came home, she wanted to move on. Legally, she couldn't. Brandon would have gladly married her."

"And if your dad had come home?" Alex held her hand.

"I don't know. Mom had changed so. And I'm sure dad had too. I don't want to marry. It tends to lock people into sorrow they can't leave. Let's live happily together as long as we can. Then if one of us needs to move on, we both can. We maintain our independence, while being together. Sometimes, couples are happier that way."

Alex held her as close as he could. It wasn't what he wanted. His tears mingled with hers. She could change her mind. Their jobs were dangerous. His dad hadn't moved on after his mother's death. There had been some closure. Perhaps in another year or two, his dad would have married Tom's mom. That would have been nice.

Amber squeezed his hand. "I know you would never hurt me. I knew kids whose parents couldn't move away from severe abuse because of marriage. I don't want that happening to me, or our kids. I want to teach them something better. I want to teach them to maintain their independence, while learning to live together. People should feel safe standing up for themselves, and turn away those who hurt themselves and others. Consequences should take the abuser out of the community, not allow them to remain in it, and dictate the lives of their victims."

She reached around him, pulled him close, and kissed his nose. "Tomorrow will be better in the daylight, I promise. Sleep now."

"You need to sleep too."

She pressed her forehead to his. "I will. I have a cot over there, by the door." She blew out the candle, and walked away.

Alex had a tough time drifting back to sleep. He had hoped to marry Amber someday. That dream meant everything to him. His dad and his mom being together so long was what he always expected for his own future. Amber expected something different. If he wanted to stay with Amber, he couldn't have that, at least not like his dreams.

Daylight drifted in through the window. Alex sat up, rubbed his head, and realized he had no idea where anything was. His bladder gurgled. Those fluids had done some good at least.

He slipped out of the bed. With his arms held out, he found where Amber slept on the cot. He kissed her.

She opened her eyes and smiled.

"Restroom?"

"Down the hall, and to the right," she mumbled.

By the time he was refreshed and back, she had sat up.

"Tam and Joe are down the hall with the nurse. We can go in a minute." She pulled him close to her. Tenderly she kissed his ear, and rubbed his back. "I do love you. I hope you understand."

Heat flowed through his body. He kissed her forehead, and rubbed her back. "Thank you for saving me." He truly meant it. Even if he couldn't have that piece of paper his parents had. He would love her however she wanted to be loved. He nibbled on her ear.

Electricity shot through his body.

"Hey, I'll race you." Joe shouted.

Alex groaned as he pulled away. The physical and mental pain from the embrace remained present as Joe crashed into his legs, with Tam right behind.

Tam laughed at them as she stopped, feet away. "Come see the baby."

Alex took her hand, and Joe's. "Okay, let's go."

The baby slept in a drawer placed on a table in a room a few doors down.

Alex reached out and touched her tiny clean fingers. "What shall we call you? Your mother's name was Kelly. How about Ellie?"

The baby cooed and gurgled as he picked her up, Tam and Joe clamored beside him. "You like Ellie then? Okay, Ellie it is."

He held her close in his arms, trying to forget the pain in Kelly's eyes the last time he saw her. Alex tried to read the emotion in Amber's eyes. He could almost imagine this child was her baby. Silly thought. He'd known Amber less than six months. It had been the best six months of his life. Now, he would have this baby, even if she left him. She had said so.

Amber reached around and held him. "We better take her outside. They will do the funeral soon, and we want her to know she was there."

Alex carried the tiny bundle in his arms. "How will she be fed?"

Amber laughed, and slapped his back. "Well, I guess we'll be buying a goat."

"With what? Plastic don't work anymore." Alex laughed as they walked out the open back door.

One of the doctors stood outside the door. "We had been going to do some new construction. The foundation for the new building has become the unmarked grave of many. Kelly is resting in her corner now."

To the left was a large open pit. The two doctors, and the nurses, stood there, holding shovels. Beyond the pit, was a concrete pad with the symbols that signified it was the hospital heliport.

Alex walked forward. The ceremony wasn't much. Each person there stepped forward, even Tam and Joe, to turn loose a handful of dirt upon the body. Two of the rescued soldiers waited by the grave; too weak to help bury Kelly.

Tam and Joe pulled Alex to the heliport, as the doctors covered the body. He couldn't see much civilization beyond the hospital

boundaries. Open desert scrubland from the boundaries to the horizon. Growing up, he never imagined spending the rest of his life in such a dry place. Going anywhere else, with trees, shade, and a beach, was out of the question now. Even if Amber wanted to, there was no transportation to take them there.

As he held Ellie close, the ground began to shake.

He sat the baby down, and leaned over her, to shield her from debris. They were far from the fault lines here.

The ground continued to shift and slide.

Tam and Joe grabbed hold of his arms.

Amber ran toward them.

Parts of the hospital walls crashed.

Alex closed his eyes, and protected the children as best he could.

Chapter 35

New River, Arizona, through Lake Pleasant to WildLife World Zoo

The distant fire crept closer as the followed the deserted road. Livia held Corbo's hand, and snuggled closer to his shoulder. There weren't any map marked volcanic regions near Phoenix. Not that that seemed to matter anymore. It could be looters, rioters, or hungry survivors.

A campfire burned in a large open area in front of a group of storage buildings. A median, and a stretch of northbound road, separated them from the fire. A pile of wood teetered nearby. Various objects were strewn about. No people were visible.

"Should we stop?" Kestrel asked.

Livia didn't know anything about this town. These people needed help. A fire was the best way to find help, and trouble, these days.

"Better check it out," One of the soldiers said. "For their safety, and ours."

The sun peeked over the horizon, as they crossed the land between the two sides of interstate. At the far edge, Kestrel stopped.

"Livia you stay here. It isn't safe," Corbo said.

Livia put her hand on Corbo's shoulder. "You're not going without me. We need each other. Neither of us can walk well."

He smiled at her. "Okay, if you say so."

He helped her out. Harvey and Valarie stood beside them. The soldiers stood near, guns ready.

Several people appeared over the ridge holding guns. One woman waved her gun. "Who are you?"

"We're part of the military unit, checking things out. Who are you?" Kestrel said.

The woman stepped forward and slightly lowered her gun. "We are the only residents left in town trying to find help. We want to leave, and don't have any fuel available."

"You have guns," Kestrel said.

Early morning light illuminated the woman. "Guns won't get us out of town."

"Are there more?"

"Yanda, trust them." A visibly pregnant woman stepped forward.

Yanda glanced at her and then pointed. "Plenty, in the gun shop over there."

"Is there any ammunition available?" Kestrel stepped forward.

"No," Yanda said. "Then what protection would we have?"

"Guns will only kill a few animals, then what will you do for food?" Livia said.

The woman stomped her foot. "If you take us with you, and the guns stay in our hands."

"That might be a good idea. Where would you like to go?"

Yanda eyed him, and then looked at the rest of the soldiers. Her eyes rested last on Livia.

"Most of us used to work for the Phoenix Zoo as relief workers. They sent us to my sister's shop to buy more tranquilizer guns and ammo. Raiders attacked, and stole our vehicle. We've been staying in the school, over yonder." She pointed to a large complex of buildings a block or so away. Debris littered the front drive area.

"I guess we don't care anymore, now that we are out of food. Probably, the animals have starved by now. We have to know," Yanda said.

"We released the animals at the Out of Africa Wildlife Park," said Livia. "If any caretakers are still at the zoo, the animals might be alive. At least some of them. That quake was bad."

"That wasn't smart, they'll starve," Yanda said.

"Volcanoes are erupting. Communication systems are down. Better to release the animals than to leave them to starve in their cages. They might learn to forage for food," Livia said.

"Until some of them become the new invasive species."

"Perhaps. Animals can naturally invade and become invasive without human help. Who knows, that invasive species may be the savings of our descendants," Kestrel said. "Look at what humans have done."

"As much as we have changed the ecosystem already, those new creatures may be the best for the new environments," Livia said.

Yanda lowered her gun. "Perhaps you're right. Is there any way we can take one vehicle and go to the Phoenix Zoo?" She led the group to the gun shop and unlocked the door.

Kestrel fingered some of the ammunition, and nodded to the soldiers. "You know, that might solve one of our problems. The Phoenix Zoo and the Wildlife World Zoo are about the same

distance. Problem is, the Phoenix Zoo is in the wrong direction. Will you release the animals?"

"The most dangerous can be used as food for other animals, or killed. Most can be released. Some of the snakes cannot," Yanda said.

"How much can we take?" Kestrel asked.

Yanda drew a deep breath. "It's my sister's store. I think she's died in the evacuation. Let's take it all. Don't want raiders to find it."

"And a trailer behind the store." Another woman grabbed a box of ammunition.

"We'll hook the trailer to Blair's vehicle. She'll load it with everything she can. And take you, and your group, back to the Phoenix Zoo." Kestrel dumped some long boxes in Corbo's outstretched arms.

It didn't take long to fill the vehicles with the remaining weapons and ammunition. Blair, the women, and their guns were on the road to their own destination.

Livia was confident that none of the animals they had already released would become invasive, and destroy the delicate desert ecosystem. Without humans to hunt them, they could thrive and create a new ecosystem.

"We'd like to be at the reactor by nightfall." Kestrel turned west. "The next part is tricky. Lake Pleasant has a drainage ditch we have to cross. I've no idea how much damage has occurred there. We can make it across as long as the damage is minimal. Typically, there's little visible water, because of a canal under the bridge."

They reached the bridge, and stopped. Water gushed under the supports, and lapped the roadway.

"That last quake." Corbo held Livia close.

"Can you do what Alex did?"

Corbo's face paled. "I can try. Is water on the road?"

"Not much," Kestrel said. "I'm not sure about this."

"Well, if he can't, I will." Livia pulled away from Corbo.

"We'll go together. Let's take our crutches. They'll have to do."

"Let us cross. Then one vehicle at a time." She closed the door.

Her heart sank. The Wildlife World animals depended on her. Livia stepped forward. One step, and then another. Water sloshed and slid through the canyon with a roar that blocked out all normal sound. Her vision and hearing tunneled. She took Corbo's hand, and they inched across, tapping the road ahead with their crutches.

The road seemed solid enough. As they reached the other side,

she hugged Corbo close. They had made it. Now, if the vehicles could make it across, everything would be fine. Otherwise, Livia and Corbo would be left alone, with no shelter, little food, or water, and hobbled on crutches.

She waved to Kestrel.

Valarie and Harvey made the crossing next.

The soldiers crept across in single file, carrying as much equipment as each dared.

Livia and Corbo hobbled down the road with Valarie and Harvey beside them. If the bridge failed, they wanted to be well out of the way.

A few hundred feet away, they leaned on the crutches. Livia leaned her head on Corbo's shoulder, trying not to add weight to him.

The first vehicle inched across.

Waves sloshed the bridge rails.

Kestrel reached their side of the river.

Livia breathed a sigh of relief.

He kept going beyond them for another few hundred feet.

The second vehicle began the slow trek across the bridge.

Another wave sloshed across the roadway, and hydroplaned the vehicle a few feet to the left.

Livia took a deep breath and grasped her chest, the crutch falling to the ground unnoticed. She didn't want to watch anyone die.

The bridge supports creaked and cracked.

The driver on the bridge kicked the gas into overdrive.

Livia, Corbo, and the soldiers jumped back, off the road.

Kestrel sped further out of the way.

The bridge swayed, and cracked.

Livia didn't look up.

Corbo grabbed her. "He made it."

The east end of the bridge pointed down, the west end rose up in the sky. The rear wheels of the second vehicle had made the crossing, before it lifted. The rear bumper bore the scratches to show how close devastation had been.

Corbo covered her head as the remaining structure crumbled into the rushing waves.

Livia's tears slipped down her cheek, to join the river at her feet. Sad for the loss of going back, and thankful they survived the crossing.

Corbo helped her up, and they hurried to the vehicle.

"We'll have to go back another way. If we make it back," Kestrel said.

Livia snuggled close to Corbo. They were both safe. Now, on to save the animals, and find Corbo's dad. Then, they would build a new life together, with a baby to join them soon.

There were many more, much shorter, bridges. The water level deceased. Debris had not pulled the highway sections down, since the shorter bridge supports were all on land.

"Almost there," Kestrel said. "If you two don't mind, we'll drop you off at the entrance gate with one or two soldiers."

"What?" Livia said. "You're going to leave us here? I thought Corporal Eagle Eye wanted you to stay with us."

"We won't be far away. We need fuel, and food. A base is a few blocks from Wildlife World. We'll be back in an hour or so. John and Nan, know the way."

Kestrel stopped the vehicle, and let Corbo help Livia out.

John, Nan, Valarie, and Harvey also came. They all carried several weapons.

"Be back soon." Kestrel drove off.

"Don't worry. It's not as bad as it sounds," John said. "Don't shoot unless you have to."

The entrance gate was shut.

Livia walked forward and pushed the gate. It opened.

Harvey stepped up beside her. "I've been here. I know where many of the animals are, or were. Not sure where the keepers might be staying."

He pushed ahead of her, with Valarie by his side.

Livia leaned on her crutches.

"Come on. We'll start at the back. Open gates, and use the zebras to herd the animals." Valarie ran ahead.

"No, don't!" An unknown male voice screamed. "You can't let them free."

John stepped. "Sorry. Little hope of saving them in cages."

"My partner died trying to save the penguins. I can't let more animals die."

"We'll do what we can. We already released one park, and the Phoenix Zoo is releasing tonight too," Livia said.

"How will the grazers survive?"

"Release them now, and the tigers and other meat eaters later tonight," Corbo said. "It'll work. Someday, the southwest will be covered in giraffes, zebra, and lions."

The three herd groups would find each other. For a few generations, the species would stay together for protection. It might be as beautiful as the ancient bison herds were imagined to be. Someday. Livia wouldn't live to see it. It would take a few human generations for the animals to repopulate the land. Especially with hungry humans around.

"I don't like the idea."

Nan held her gun halfway to her waist. "General's orders. Release the animals and they might survive. In cages with no supplies, they will die."

"I'm Quinn. We'll do what we can." He lifted his hands and turned away from them muttering.

"Come on. Let's go." Valarie said.

"Let me grab the keys." Quinn hurried into the building on the left. He was back in a moment with a box.

"All the keys we'll need." He closed his eyes a moment. "I can't believe I'm doing this. The animals are out of food and water. So am I." His hands shook until the keys in the box rattled.

"You sure there's no hope of the power and supplies coming back in time?"

John put his hand on the man's shoulder. "There may not be any more power. There won't be any more supplies, for a long time. Hurry, we can't stay long. The heat of the day is almost here."

The man closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. "Let's go. Release the addax and onyx first. They can help herd and protect the others."

Quinn glanced at Livia and Corbo with their crutches. "Can you two walk far?"

"We are both hurt. We will do what we can." Livia said.

"I think the golf cart has enough gas for one more time around the park. Take it." Quinn tossed a key at her.

"Which one?" Livia tried to catch up to him.

"Try that one, closest to the door."

Livia jumped in, turned the key, and it started. She drove to Corbo and he jumped in.

"Here take these keys and a map. Release the giraffe, and onyx, and work them to the gate as we come around the other side." Quinn handed a map and keys to Corbo.

Livia spun the vehicle around, and drove in the direction the man pointed.

The giraffe enclosure was first. "The animals are hungry enough,

they'll bolt easy." She glanced at the map. "We'll free the onyx first."

At that gate, she shifted through the keys, trying each one, until she finally found the correct one. All the animals waited close to the gate. She picked up a small rock and threw it behind them. Wild onyx raced out of the gate, and down the pathway.

Livia hobbled across the walkway to release the camels and gazelle.

Corbo stayed behind, blocking the path.

They hurried through releasing animals, taking turns, so neither walked too much. Livia patted a few as they walked out the gates past her. Soon, the loose grazers had all wondered into the kangaroo exhibit, where stinky, scum covered water evaporated in the midday sun.

"That's all, I think. The water is nasty. We haven't had running water for over a week," Quinn said.

Valarie, Stanley, and John arrived with the last few herd animals.

"Let's leave them here. We have to be sure the fish won't suffer anymore. The penguins are already dead, and I'm not sure about the sharks."

"Can I go?" Livia asked.

The man took a deep breath. "You won't like it. Those buildings reek of dying, rotting flesh."

"Maybe we can save something."

"Maybe." Quinn jumped up in the cart with them, and pointed where to go.

Quinn opened the building doors. What should have a blast of ice cold air, was instead a noxious fermenting furnace of rotting fish scales.

Livia coughed, and covered her mouth and nose.

"Not much can be saved here. We've already fed many of our fish to the sharks. I don't want them to suffer. I wish there was a way to save them."

Livia walked to the tank.

The sharks were dull, fins down, and barely alive. Their water was already low, stinky, dark, not clean or clear at all.

"A gun won't pierce their hide," Quinn said. "I don't know an easy way to put them out of their misery. Eventually, they'll suffocate."

Few animals lived inside the buildings. They were able to release a few turtles and tortoises. If they didn't live, they would become food for hungry animals. At least their lives would not be wasted.

Livia found one tank that had cavefish in it, and they were alive.

"Can we take them?"

"I can find a bucket, if you have a place in mind," Quinn said.

"Anywhere other than here. Maybe we can set them free in that canal, and they can reach a cave."

He laughed and ran for a bucket. "They don't take much water."

She caught as many as she could, and they hurried along the row of tanks.

Soon, they were back at the kangaroo center, with the cave fish bucket.

"Livia, you take the cart and drive it around the walkabout. We'll block access, and force the animals out the main gate," Quinn said.

Livia waited until everyone was in place. She drove slowly at first. Then realized the animals were used to the slow moving vehicles. She stopped, and pulled a red shirt from her backpack. All she had to do was convince a few animals to move toward the gate, and the rest would follow.

She hit the gas, held on with one hand, screamed, and waved the shirt.

At first, the animals stared at her.

She didn't stop.

They turned, as if all one animal, and fled for the gate. Zebras, onyx, camels, deer, and many other grazers from around the world unleashed west of Phoenix.

Livia stopped at the gate, panting.

The engine sputtered and died, as the grazers raced across the road, and out of sight amid the desert fauna.

Chapter 36

WildLife World Zoo to Palo Verde to Avondale Arizona

Corbo ran to Livia and helped her off the golf cart.

"Are you okay?"

"Tired is all," Livia said.

"I imagine. Kestrel should be back soon. Everyone's getting ready to go."

"We can't forget the cats," Quinn said.

"You and I will stay here and let them out in hour so," John said. "Then we'll walk to the base. It's a few blocks away."

"We can check on the horse farm to," Quinn said.

"Good idea. Let's go rest in the shade." John said.

"We'll stay here too," Valarie said. "The horses are close?"

"Half-way to the base," Quinn said. "Come on."

Valarie and Harvey followed the two men back to the shade of the broken refreshment stand.

Within minutes Kestrel was back to pick them up. There were now four vehicles.

"Glad you made it safe," Corbo said. "How rough is this trip to the reactor going to be?"

"Not sure. One reason for reinforcements."

"At least we are completed two assignments," Corbo said.

"It's about forty miles to the nuclear reactor. We should be able to make it an hour or two," Kestrel said.

"I should hope so," Corbo said. "How much further to Florence?"

"About a hundred miles. Florence is our last step. Corbo Eagle Eye wants us to finish up there, and then head back to base. If there are any roads left."

Corbo helped Livia in. "I want to find my dad. I didn't even know about him until a few months ago."

"We'll take you there as soon as we can. It'll be tomorrow before you can search, at the earliest."

For two hours, they dodged potholes, and broken down vehicles. By midafternoon, the sun beat down relentlessly. Wildlife sightings had been limited to a few coyotes.

Kestrel turned off the interstate, and drove down a long stretch of road. The three massive building complexes, and the cooling pools of water, waited for them behind high security gates. No smoke rose from the reactors. A whiff of a cloud rested off to the west.

As turbulent as the Earth was, a nuclear reactor was not the place to be. Too many things could go wrong. It would be better to be searching for his father, rather than visiting here.

The towering gates were open. Tensions were high, as Kestrel entered the complex, followed by the other three vehicles.

Kestrel stopped the vehicle near one of the buildings.

The first building was locked tight.

Corbo leaned on his crutches.

They marched to the second building. The dusty steps showed no sign of footprints. Kestrel turned back once he verified the door was locked.

The cloud in the west darkened, and grew.

"The engineers that should be here could be anywhere. It spans miles." Kestrel glanced back at the cloud, and the soldiers. "Go ahead and split up. Go in pairs in case you find somebody. Don't go inside the buildings. If a door will open, shout." He motioned to Corbo and Livia.

The group searched for an hour. It felt much longer. Clouds thickened, darkened, and crept nearer. Near one of the cooling ponds, they found the small group of engineers.

"Hello there," Kestrel said. "Is everything okay?"

"Sure is. We hoped someone would come for us soon. Most of the line is down, so there is no need to keep producing electricity. It wouldn't do much good. Plus, we can't move supplies in, or out. It will become dangerous any day," the engineer said.

"I thought this was the safest nuclear reactor in the world." Kestrel hurried ahead of the oncoming clouds.

"It is. We have to shut it down because we are almost out of supplies, and can't reach our supply lines. It may be years before will be able to start it back up. We have to be sure it's safe until then."

"If you leave, what if no one ever comes back?" Corbo asked.

The engineers glanced at each other. "The statistics say it would be safe. After all the earthquakes rarely damage this area."

"What about wild animals, or wild weather?" Livia asked.

"Eventually, anything's possible. Most humans won't be around by then. Or, maybe they'll already be using it, or found a safety

solution. It's deactivated, for now."

The man might be right about it being safe in their lifetime. A few lifetimes from now, who knew. Most of the soldiers had gathered back at the vehicles and waited on them.

It was almost evening. They began the last hundred-mile journey to Florence, to find his father. If the clouds in the distance didn't bring bad weather, they might make the town by nightfall.

The first drops of rain hit the ground in front of them.

Corbo helped Livia into the vehicle.

Two of the engineers followed.

The clouds were overhead and ice-cold rain poured heavily down.

He jumped in and pulled the door shut behind him.

Kestrel pulled the vehicle back onto the road. "I don't know if I can outrun those storms. Potholes rule the road."

Corbo grunted. Kestrel was right. It was scary. Storms in Arizona that came unexpected like this never turned out good. Rain was valued, although a flash flood downpour could turn deadly in a hurry.

Drops pounded down. The sky grew darker. Their vehicle bounced through the holes, out the open gate, and back onto the main road.

"We are going west, and then we'll head south where we'll meet the main interstate," Kestrel said. "If we make it that far."

Corbo pulled Livia close. This vehicle was strong enough to keep them safe and dry.

"I think we're staying even with the clouds," one soldier said. "Perhaps we should stop, and let the clouds go past us. Kestrel would see the road better."

"You must be from somewhere far north, or west." Kestrel swerved to miss another pothole.

"Sure am. I wouldn't drive in this. I'd wait it out."

Kestrel laughed. "Not here you don't."

He swerved, this time narrowly avoiding a fallen road sign.

The rain beating against the windshield stopped.

"Oh good," the man said. "The sun will come back out soon."

Corbo grabbed Livia and held her close.

Kestrel slammed on the brakes. "Out now."

Corbo opened the door, dragged Livia out, and glanced behind them.

The air was calm. The wind stopped. Rain pattered on ahead of them, into the distance.

Behind them, a funnel cloud reached for the ground.

"What's wrong?" The northerner asked, grumbling as he stepped out of the vehicle.

Corbo pointed.

"A wispy cloud. Enough to give a little shower. Nothing like what we drove through."

Corbo groaned.

Other soldiers piled out and dragged the man along. They searched for a safe place to hide. There was a board on the ground. Only one. They ran to it, and pushed Livia in the center. Everyone else packed in around her, and pulled the edges down.

The wind whipped and moaned. Debris was picked up, and thrown in the air. Rocks and other small objects pounded the plywood board. Roaring winds whistled louder.

Keeping Livia safe was all that mattered. Corbo put his hands over her head so that nothing could break through the board. She had done so much for him, and stood beside him even though she knew his past, and what his future should hold.

She had done everything that he would want from a potential wife. It had been selfishness to think that he did not want to marry her. She deserved a better companion, one who truly understood her and her culture. Especially since he had no culture.

She had stayed with him through everything, leaving her parents behind. If he had made her happy this long, perhaps he should stay with her, and make her happy. Especially now that a baby was on the way.

The board bounced in the soldier's grasp.

Wind whipped underneath. It splashed rain, mud, and small creatures into their faces.

The board snapped in the middle right over Livia's head.

She screamed.

He grabbed her, and pulled her under his body. Then, he grabbed the remains of the board and tried to hold it steady over his head.

The roar moved on. The wind began to calm.

Corbo took a deep breath.

A mouse ran from under his face. Bugs scurried about the ground, searching for a safe place to hide.

Corbo lifted the remains of the board off Livia.

"Is everyone okay?" Kestrel asked.

There were a few grunts, and groans. No one was visibly in

serious condition. One man had a gash on his face from trying to hold the board steady. Another had scratched up hands.

A few from one of the other vehicles had not been able to crawl under the board. They had huddled together, soaked, muddy, and safe.

The vehicles had stayed on the road through the tornado. The winds had turned one around, and it faced west now.

"I'll go check the condition of the vehicles," Kestrel said. "Be sure no one's hurt. Try to rake some of the mud off."

A few of the soldiers laughed. Trying to clean up would be difficult even if they did have warm water and clean clothes. People stood up, and moved around, checking for broken bones. Before long, they were all back in the vehicles and traveling.

Seventy-five more miles to travel to Florence, and Corbo's hope of finding his father.

They hadn't been on the road long, when one of the vehicles behind them signaled with their headlights.

"Kestrel, they're blinking. I don't know what's wrong." Corbo turned around to look.

Kestrel pulled over.

Corbo got out with him, and walked to the vehicle behind.

The third vehicle had stopped about a half mile back. The driver and the engineers from the power plant jogged toward them. "Everything seemed fine at first. The gas ran out. I guess a rock bounced up and hit the gas tank. Now what do we do? All four vehicles are already crowded."

"We can't leave anyone behind," Kestrel said.

"I don't see any vehicles we can ask the owners for, or even any owners." The second vehicle's driver pointed at the empty road.

"Our mission requires all of us to arrive there at the same time. We will have to try to repair, or replace the gas tank, and find fuel anywhere we can."

"At least there's houses and businesses around," Corbo said. "There may be some hidden vehicles in garages with gas in their tanks."

"We'll stay and work on removing gas tank," one of the engineers said. "Go on. Be back soon."

Corbo glanced at the sky. It was clear. The early evening sun lengthened the shadows, and the mud was drying up.

"I'll take Livia. We will be that way." Corbo pointed to the left where there were several car lots. "We'll take the one on the far

right."

"Take a gun," the driver said.

"Probably need scorpion spray," Corbo said.

Corbo took Livia's hand and helped her out of the vehicle. "Time to find an empty gas tank, and a full one."

She laughed. The sound sent a tingle up Corbo's spine.

"We'll manage. Let's go." She grabbed the crutches.

"Wish we could take one of these, rather than do all the dirty work. Not sure how the retrofit will work."

"They won't be interchangeable," the soldier with them said. "And if it weren't for the engineers, we'd have to take one as is. We need the reinforced steel and windows of the vehicles we came in."

They found a hummer behind one of the buildings surrounded by RV's. It didn't have a "for sale" sign.

Corbo waved for the other soldiers to come over and help. It would take a lot of sweat on such a hot day to find, and remove the tank.

"I think we'll have to break into a building," Livia said. "One at least will have a drink machine. They'll be okay, if they haven't exploded from the heat."

Corbo covered his eyes and gazed at all of the various buildings in the area. "That one looks likely." He pointed to the nearest garage building. Several vehicles had been abandoned on lifts.

"Doesn't look like anyone else has broken in. Let's try it." He hurried over to the building.

The hummer's alarm went off.

A rock from the tornado as it passed through could have broken the shattered window in the building. The door would be open if raiders had broken in. Corbo stuck his head in the broken window. His body blocked the sunlight from the window.

"I don't see anything. I'll have to climb to in."

He pulled himself through, and searched for the drink machine.

"You wait. I'll bring them to you. Keep the crutches ready if you need them."

The machine would need a key to open it. A room beside the machine was unlocked. Plenty of drinks. He carried a box of water to the bay door. It took a few minutes to open it.

"Here Livia. There's plenty more."

She walked in. "How about we check those vehicles?"

"They're up too high."

"I can climb up there." She grabbed a ladder by an inner door.

She leaned it against the first truck and climbed up, gently testing her ankle on each step.

"A little here. Not enough to be worth the trouble."

She climbed back down, and moved to the second. "More. Have to keep trying."

She moved the ladder to the third vehicle, a large car. "You know. I don't wanna climb up again. There has to be some gas cans around here somewhere."

There was a shout outside, and something heavy hit the ground with a thud.

Corbo ran out into the sunshine, shading his eyes.

Chapter 37

Kingfisher, across Cimarron River to Dover, Vance Air Force Base, Enid Oklahoma

The nurses and doctors cried as they covered up Kelly's body.

Amber helped move the loose dirt to cover her body. Not much protection against wild and hungry animals. Tam and Joe's father and grandmother had had less.

Alex sat on the helipad with Tam, Joe, and Ellie. Something about his profile in the sun, with clouds streaming overhead touched a chord in her heart. Her hands and legs trembled.

One of the nurses, Tracey, yelled.

The ground shook more than her hands.

Hospital walls wobbled. They may have been built to the codes of the time. To code walls couldn't withstand repeated attacks, as the earth split and moved, without time, opportunity, or supplies to repair the last year's cracks in the foundation, walls, and roof.

Alex shouted something she couldn't hear.

The wall closest to the burial pit groaned and decorative bricks shattered and scattered at the base. Windows cracked.

She grabbed Tracey's hand. "Come on. We have to go." Amber pulled the hand of the doctor who had saved Alex.

Stanley stumbled beside her, and almost fell into the open pit as the ground lifted near them.

She grabbed his arm and pulled him back from the brink.

Gradually, they all stumbled to Alex and the helipad.

The ground stopped shifting.

Amber glanced back at the hospital.

One of the walls crashed to the ground, billowing up clouds of debris. Kelly was fully buried now.

They all coughed and sputtered.

Rubble rained onto the ground around them. No large wild animal would easily uncover her body now.

Amber grabbed Tam and Joe, pulled them into her arms. She sat beside Alex, and wept softly.

The noise died away.

The breeze from the collapse wafted away the finer particles, far

to the east.

Tam wiggled free, and pulled on Joe's arm.

"Come on, we have to find somewhere safe. Is anywhere safe?"

"I don't know anymore. We will find somewhere." Amber touched their hands.

"We have to go," Tracey said. "My son and grandchildren. I need to see them and be sure they are safe."

The five people abandoned at the hospital were struggling to hold the thin fabric of their lives together. Five adults and no children were not enough people to build a new community. Once she and Alex left, they would be even more alone with no food or shelter.

"We'll take you with us. Where are your son and grandson?"

"In Dover. It's not far. I should have been home days ago." Tracey cried.

The other nurse and two doctors tried to comfort her.

"What about the rest of you? Where are your families?" Alex asked.

"They evacuated. No one has heard from the tent town the evacuees were sent to." One of the doctors sat down next to the pit.

The evacuees had flooded north and east. Camp cities had been hastily set up, often in harvested cornfields. Food was scarce. Communication almost nonexistent. Doctors had no medicine to treat outbreaks that were bound to occur without proper sewage treatment centers.

"They didn't want you for the camps?"

"Nope. They needed us here, for the prisons in the state. We ran out of fuel weeks ago." The doctor stared at the crumbled wall. "What little food we had is now buried."

" We need one person to go in and gather as many of our belongings as we can. If it's safe," Amber said.

"I think the wing we stayed in last night is mostly intact; for the moment. I'll go. Everyone else, go on to the vehicles." Stanley turned and stared at the ruins of the hospital.

One of the doctors reached out and put his hand on his shoulder. "I'll go to. I'll grab all the medicine I can. There's a few cans of baby formula in the room Tracey stayed in."

Before long, they were all in the vehicles with as many of their belongings as they had been able to save. Tam and Joe were bundled under their quilt, still damp in spots. Baby Ellie nestled in Amber's arms.

Stanley pulled out of the parking lot, and turned north. The

building that had looked so grand and safe yesterday, was now a wasteland of rubble and steel. Parts of the roof had fallen. Debris scattered about the grounds. Dust blanketed everything in sight.

Amber hugged little Ellie; wrapped in the less than clean blanket. No diapers, little formula, and no memory of her mother.

Tam reached over and patted the infant's head.

"She'll be fine. Too bad we don't have that colt and its mother."

Tam had a point. The mother horse would have been perfect.

The fractured road wasn't too bad. They passed plenty of abandoned buildings, many partially flattened. Potholes, and even a few road shifts were navigable in the high profile vehicles.

"We'll be reaching the Cimarron River in a few minutes," the nurse said. "Its water table has been known to drop below the sandy river bed, that's why there are several ponds beyond the river bend."

Amber leaned forward as they reached the bridge.

"I'll go check," Alex said.

Amber kissed his cheek as he pulled away.

Alex walked out to the bridge. He took each step carefully. He didn't appear to be wavering in the heat of the day. Once he reached the other side, he waved them forward. To be safe, one vehicle at a time would cross. When all three vehicles were across, Alex opened the door, and slid in beside her.

"Safe. No sign of damage here. That worries me."

"Why?"

"Wait. We are going to the Air Force base after we drop off the nurses and doctors in Dover. We'll see if they have heard anything."

Amber didn't need one more thing to worry about.

Ellie burst into tears.

Tam reached over, patted her. "Hush baby. You can eat soon."

Ellie's eyes watched Tam, as she made hand motions above her face.

"A few more miles," Tracey said.

The ponds on either side of the road were a deep dark color with no vegetation visible nearby. Anything could be hiding there. With the sun at almost midday, their color was like thunderclouds on the ground.

Stanley slowed as they reached the buildings of town.

The buildings appeared structurally sound, from a distance. No looters had struck.

"A few people stayed behind near here, on the farms, like my son and grandchildren," Tracey said.

Amber smiled at the excitement in her voice, and inability to sit still. Tracey was glad to be going home, something Amber could never do. Her home had been destroyed by an earthquake. And even if she could make it there, her mother and Karen wouldn't be there.

A tear dropped on baby Ellie.

Perhaps she should marry Alex. It would make him happy. Love was a mysterious thing. She didn't want to be bound if their lives changed. How would it affect Tam, Joe, and Ellie?

"There, to the left. I can see the house."

A house, with several other structures clustered around it. It reminded her of Dena's ranch.

"A few neighbors sent their horses and cows to join our cow herd when they left. Isn't it beautiful?"

"Sure." It was beautiful. The type of home she wanted for Tam, Joe, and now Ellie.

Several adults and children crowded around the vehicles, and helped them out. Food cooked on an open fire near the main house. Before long, the group joined the families for a meal.

"The local houses have been abandoned," Tracey's son said. "Anyone else want to stay? I have the keys, and am supposed to watch them."

After a meal, the other doctors and nurse decided to stay in Dover.

"What about the baby?"

Amber thought about letting Ellie stay here. She had been much happier after a bottle of formula with a little fresh cow's milk in it. She couldn't give her up, not now. After all, she had promised Alex he could have her.

"You can't take a cow with you, or milk. What will you do?"

"I don't want to give her up either. We can't feed her." Alex put his arm around her shoulder.

"We have a few cans of formula. That will feed her until we reach someplace with cows."

He smiled and clapped Alex on the back. "Your young wife trusts too much. One of my neighbors ran a convenience store. Maybe they have some. I'll go check." He took one of the horses from the nearest corral.

Amber smiled up at Alex as they waited. There was no point in arguing that they weren't married, and never would be. She rested in the shade of the porch.

Ellie cooed on her lap.

The doctors pulled up water from the well for their trip.

Tracey's son returned with a burlap sack to Alex. "Formula and water. You'll need both. Perhaps, in Enid, you can find more."

"Thanks," Amber said. "We delivered this baby, as her mom died. We don't want anything to happen to her."

He laughed. "And what will you do when she grows up, and marries?"

"I don't wanna think about it." Amber stepped into the vehicle. "Besides, by then, she will be grown and able to care for herself, if we raised her right. We'll be proud to let her be the adult she is meant to be."

"Sure you will. Be safe." Tracey's son hugged his wife, and mother close. Several children played nearby. Other adults showed the newcomers around the farm.

"Thirty miles," Stanley said. "Let's hope we make it by dark."

Amber settled herself, Tam, Joe, and little Ellie in. The children would nap.

Alex wrapped his arm around her shoulder, and kissed her neck, sending shivers up and down her spine.

She turned to him and smiled. "Maybe later."

His face lit up, and he snuggled tighter against her.

The trip was monotonous. Bouncing over holes pushed the blanket onto the floor from time to time. Amber tugged it back up, and tucked the children in. Although the weather was hot, they drew comfort from the quilt sewn by their now dead grandmother.

As her hands smoothed the blanket resting on Tam's shoulders, a comfort and warmth caressed her. Her grandmother watched over her, as theirs did over them. A tear slipped down her cheek. It splashed on a strawberry in the patterned fabric.

"Almost there," Monty said. "No idea what we'll find."

Amber softly shook Tam and Joe awake.

They sat up, rubbed their eyes, and looked out the window.

"Can we stay here a while? Tired of traveling," Joe said.

"No idea. We were supposed to go back to the other base from here. The road back is closed."

Stanley pulled to a stop in front of an imposing looking building. "Alex, Amber, you and the kids wait here, or under the shade anyway."

Amber handed Ellie to Alex. She pulled her pack onto her back, and helped Tam and Joe out. They sat on the curb and waited.

In a few minutes, Monty returned, pale in the heat of late day. "Alex, we need you. It's not good."

Alex glanced at Amber. "Be back soon."

He kissed Ellie, and handed her back to Amber. Alex patted Tam and Joe on the head before following Monty into the building.

Joe and Tam played with pebbles on the ground, and Ellie cried, ready for another feeding.

The children had come to mean a lot to her. Now, she felt left out of adult conversations, because of them. She had reached adulthood, and acceptance into the scientific community, only a month ago. And now, was being encouraged to leave it behind, to be a mother herself. This wouldn't do. Her mother would never have let other people leave her out of the scientific community.

She stood up, and focused on the building. "Come on Tam and Joe. Whatever they are saying matters to us as much as them. No point in shielding you now."

Tam picked up the quilt, and Joe followed her to the door.

Amber ushered them in, glancing back at the sky as she did so.

A spot of silver was visible, maybe a cloud, above the horizon. Maybe a water tower that hadn't toppled. Or, maybe not.

A tingle went up her spine.

Chapter 38

Vance Air Force Base, Enid Oklahoma to Webb City, Oklahoma

Alex walked into the building. Amber would follow soon. In fact, he barely believed she had waited at all.

"Anything the kids shouldn't know?"

"We have plenty of time," Monty said.

"Now." Alex stopped, and glanced back at the door.

Monty shuffled his boot on the dirty floor. "Few communications. Everything is down. We have access to satellite here." He looked up at Alex.

"Your dad and Dr. Evan have bad news at Yellowstone."

The door creaked open. Tam and Joe ran down the hall.

Alex sank to the floor, and pulled Tam and Joe into his arms. "How soon?"

Monty glanced at Amber. "Don't know. I'll see if someone can watch the kids."

"They aren't leaving us. No more than ten feet away. I promised them," Amber said.

"They'll be in the way, make noise, ask questions, and not understand." A man stepped into the hallway.

Amber touched their shoulders. "I know you've heard it all before. Not these two. They've seen enough."

"Exactly. Enough. No more." The man rocked on his heels and blocked the hallway.

A woman stepped out of the room behind him. "They act clam enough. I'll keep them on one side of the room while you update these scientists and soldiers. Their mother can see them, and they can see her. Okay?"

The man grunted. "Carly, keep them by the door."

Alex and Amber followed him into the large room.

Carly closed the door behind them. "Sorry, Master Sergeant Griff is preoccupied at the moment. Go on." She waved toward the equipment on the far side of the room.

The woman sat down on her knee, reached for Tam and Joe. "Now, tell me your names, and all about you."

Tam placed the quilt on the floor, sat down. "I don't want to talk. I want to draw."

"Okay," Carly said.

"I'll be nearby," Amber touched her shoulder.

"I'll watch Ellie too. I took care of Joe. Gramma's quilt will make a good nest."

Amber sat beside Tam to lay Ellie beside her. "You come to me if you need me."

Tam nodded.

Joe pulled a few small toy figures out of his backpack, and dropped them on the concrete floor.

Alex took Amber's hand, and they walked to where the men and women were gathered around Master Sergeant Griff.

"It's not good. Too many disturbances."

"Yellowstone? I thought they said it was safe, and wouldn't blow."

Master Sergeant Griff gazed around the group. "It was. The recent disturbances have been too much."

"Actually," Alex said. "An eruption now may be a good thing. It won't have near the strength or power as if it had finished building up steam underneath."

"That is what your dad said. We will call him in a few minutes. He'll want to know you are safe, before." The Master Sergeant's words trailed off.

"Before what?" Alex asked.

"Better let him explain. By the way, Corporal Puma called a bit ago as well. He has another mission for you and Amber."

Master Sergeant Griff marched to a complex array of equipment. Within minutes, he had the call placed to Colorado.

Speaking to his dad. So many times they had talked by radio when his dad had been in a remote location. Then, Alex had always been safe at home, or with Tom and his mom. In some ways, now felt little different. Except, Tom, Karen, and Tom's mom, were with his dad at the location of the impending eruption. If Yellowstone did blow, they might need to be further away, if there was time.

"Alex, here you go. Putting it on speaker."

Alex took the microphone. "Dad, how are you?"

"I'm fine. In the thick of things, as usual. Are you safe?"

"Amber and I are fine. We have rescued three children. Hope you can see them soon."

"I won't. Dr. Evan and I. We are sending Tom and Karen to meet

you. Then." Noise in the background cut his dad's voice off.

"Dad, what is it?"

"The continental shelf has shifted too much. When Yellowstone erupts, it'll cover at least half the Mesa Falls ash bed."

Most of the evacuation tent cities were in that area. "Dad?"

"Be a good father. Take care of Amber, and those children. Tom and Karen will join you."

Tears streamed down his cheeks. "Dad, come with them."

"I can't. This is the chance of a lifetime. I'll leave a record. Maybe your grandchildren will find it buried in the ash."

"Dad no!"

"It'll fulfill my life. I'm proud of you."

The machine crackled.

Amber grabbed his arm.

"Alex?" Dr. Evan's voice sounded clear.

"Here." Alex mumbled through the tears.

"We can't save the tent cities. No transportation, no fuel, and disease is running rampant. It would cause a panic. Better to let those who are strong enough survive."

"I don't want you and dad to die."

"That's always been the risk we took Alex. One reason I never married. One reason your dad is like he is, so distant. He is proud of you."

More static.

Amber snatched the microphone as it slipped from his hand.

He cried on her shoulder.

Master Sergeant Griff came over to him and stood in front of him. "You okay?"

"I will be. I don't want him to die. He will if he goes there now." Alex's voice thickened.

"He's doing his job. And maybe, just maybe, this is how he wants his life to end. It's a passion. Sometimes, our passions lead us to do things no one will ever understand."

"We suggested the evacuation," Amber said. "Does that mean we are guilty for all the deaths?"

Master Sergeant Griff waited a long moment. "No. They had to leave the earthquake zone. And, how many would have died from falling buildings, disease, or looting if they had stayed? In fact, you were right. More are alive at this moment, because no one has anything that others would want to steal. They will die suddenly, not slowly, and in fear for months."

A noise from across the room pulled his attention away a moment. "You didn't tell them where to go. They had to leave the quake, flood, and eruption damaged areas. It was the military who set up the evacuation centers."

Amber wiped away the mingled tears on her cheek.

"Go rest. Our base has to decide what we want to do now."

Alex took Amber's arm and steered her toward the door. They walked down the hall, and found the restrooms. It had been a long day. At least electricity and sewage worked here, for the moment. Whether the power was solar or wind, was unclear.

They walked back, arm in arm. Amber leaned on his shoulder. She straightened up before they went in the door.

"Corporal Puma recommends our base join the people in Dover. There are concerns." He glanced over his head at Alex and Amber.

"Come on, he wants to speak to you as well."

Alex took the phone. "Yes, Corporal?"

"Alex, glad you made it safe. I want you and Amber to go to Webb City. Tulsa Library was attempting to ship their library books to a safer place at Fort Scott. They never made it. We need you to check on it there, and follow their trail. Save what you can. Who knows what, destruction Yellowstone may do. Be quick."

"Okay sir. What then?" Alex said.

"Monty will bring the conveys back here, through Oklahoma City. Let me speak to him now."

"Yes sir."

Monty spoke to Corporal Puma. When finished, he turned to Alex. "We all need the break. It's at least a couple of hours' drive, maybe more, depending on the lake."

"Lake?" Amber asked.

"Kaw Lake. We can either drive over it, or south of it. If the quakes haven't damaged either road."

Alex groaned. It would be a long night, and another long drive. His strength was still low from the tear gas. Monty, and several of the other soldiers, had suffered more from it at the time. It would take a few days to recover.

Morning came, and back on the road. Tam and Joe had to be as tired of traveling as he was. Kids needed to run and play to build up their muscles. Once, he had wanted to travel everywhere. Now, he wanted a place to stay. Preferably with Amber, if she would have him.

He pulled her close, and she rested her head on his shoulder. "A

few more days."

Baby Ellie nestled peacefully on her lap.

Seven ghost towns, and four rivers later, they reached Webb City.

Monty didn't know this area well. When they reached Webb City, he stopped the vehicle. The additional vehicles that had joined them, stopped behind him.

"Those hills weren't there before. Volcanoes aren't forming here, are they?"

"Not necessarily," Alex said. "The east North American plate has slid further east and north. It folded the land here. A year ago, I would have been glad to see new mountains in the making."

"We have to find the caravan," Monty said. "Do you think this area will flood?"

"Not if the new hills hold the lake in. The water table will change, and ponds will form in areas that are now lower. It may be a few years though before they hold water year round."

On down the road, four semi-trailers were parked off road, against the trees. No one was in sight.

Monty parked behind the trucks.

"Tam, Joe, you stay close. Be careful of snakes and other creatures," Alex said.

Tam grabbed his hand, holding onto Joe as well.

Amber walked ahead of them, up the driveway on the left side of the road.

A house hid behind trees. Six men rested in the shade from the late morning sun. A drum and a guitar leaned against a tree.

"Hello." Alex walked up. "Are you the truck drivers?"

"Sure. Haven't seen anyone in weeks. Ran out of gas. How did you get here?"

"Didn't you hear our vehicles?"

"Naw. Henny was playing the drums, and Ryan the guitar. We were trying to decide what to do. Food's about ran out here."

Amber pulled Tam and Joe close.

Alex glanced at her.

She walked behind the trees with the children, holding Ellie even closer.

If Amber avoided them, it wasn't good. Of course, six men alone for weeks. Not a good thing.

Monty walked up. "Have you taken care of the cargo? We are supposed to try store the collection. Then send you to somewhere

there are people."

"Aren't many left are there?"

"Not many," Monty said.

"We haven't done much. Had to break into the house to eat and sleep. Who's the woman?"

"She is this man's wife," Monty said.

Alex hadn't argued the point before, and wasn't about to now. "Stay away from her, and the children."

The men laughed. "Hey, we have to ask."

Alex had a feeling he forgot to add, "at least for now." His spine tingled.

Monty glanced at Alex, and then back the men. "Go ahead. Pack your things. We'll send you on the first vehicle out. It leaves in five minutes. Go."

The men jumped up and gathered their bags, drum, and guitar. "We brought everything with us. No point in leaving things in the truck."

The driver patted his weapon. "Well, walk on to the road. I'll point out the vehicle, and three men who will drive you to safety."

Alex waited. More men, desperate men, might be hiding behind the house.

Amber and the children snuck back out from under the trees.

"Stay here. I'm going a bit closer to listen." Alex snuck under the trees. The drivers laughed and one grabbed the shoulders of the other two as they walked to the third military vehicle. That driver took the truck keys from them, and then hurried them in. A few words with the three soldiers, and the vehicle soon travelled south.

Alex sighed with relief.

The second vehicle pulled out and the driver drove north.

Monty hurried back. "It's safer this way. There are some people in Webb City. The other vehicle is going on to check. Those truck drivers won't be back. Now we can find a safe place to hide a library."

There were a lot of the buildings around the house. Most, not in the best of shape, though not tumbling down at the moment.

"Not here. They can break back in. Let's look on the other side of the road," Amber said.

No suitable place was found after a quick walking search.

The second vehicle returned. Monty hurried to speak to the drive.

Alex and Amber waited in the shade of Monty's vehicle.

Monty waved them over. "He found several people living in Webb City. They seem nice enough. He brought one along."

A tall man stepped out. "Hi, I'm Calvin. We haven't come this far since the hills formed. We are staying close to our homes."

"Are there many of you?" Alex asked.

"Ten adults and a few children. What kind of help can we offer?"

"We are supposed to find a safe place to store Tulsa's library, abandoned here. The drivers ran out of fuel."

Calvin laughed. "The trucks may not be completely empty. The drivers probably stopped when they saw the house and fields. I know the perfect place to take the books."

Monty climbed into the first truck. "It does start. It says it's empty."

"Enough to reach the place I have in mind," Calvin said. "Come on, let's try." He jumped in.

Alex drove the military vehicle Monty had been driving.

Two soldiers drove the other two trucks behind Calvin.

Following Calvin's directions, they reached an adobe building that was on a high area of ground. The first truck sputtered out of fuel as they reached it.

"The adobe building was supposed to be a new hospital. It's plenty strong to hold books." Calvin walked to the doors of the truck. "Come on, let's go."

It took until nightfall to move all the books into the adobe building.

Tam and Joe played with the local kids near the door all day. Ellie slept inside the door out of the sun. Soldiers and the townspeople, trudged by her, loaded with books.

Alex found Amber after his last load in.

She was feeding Ellie, and looking at a book about cultures from around the world. She pointed to the page. "I wonder if these arctic cultures will survive? Some cultures on the brink of extinction will die, and others may revive, if they can find food and shelter."

Her eyes sparkled with excitement. "The modern world may not survive. The ancient world will return with new customs, and new cultures. Hopefully, they won't make our mistakes."

"It wasn't our mistakes that caused this, was it?" Alex caressed her cheek.

"Some. It would have happened someday. We sped it up with drilling, and eroding the environment. It'll be generations before it recovers."

"So, maybe our great grandchildren will know peace." He leaned over to kiss her lips.

"Peace with themselves and the environment, let's hope so."

Amber placed Ellie in the pile of blankets she would sleep in tonight, between Tam and Joe. She leaned forward and kissed Alex.

The kiss sent electricity up and down his spine.

He reached around her waist and she giggled.

"Hey, we're trying to sleep over here," A groggy voice said.

Amber took Alex's hand, grabbed a candle, and they slipped into a quiet corner, surrounded by books.

Chapter 39

Avondale through Phoenix to Army base in Florence, Arizona

Livia grabbed her crutches and stumbled after Corbo.

"That came down easy." One soldier stepped back from the billowing cloud of dust around the hummer.

"Now, getting it back up in the transport vehicle, and filled, won't be so easy," another of the soldiers said. "Let's carry it."

"Need help?" Corbo asked.

"Naw. You all find anything?"

"Drinks. And some fuel."

"I think there's more. I saw a wheelbarrow, and there is a tank in back. Surely they keep some extra fuel on hand." Livia walked back to the building.

"Should need it soon."

Livia explored. The grease and spilled fuel odor was strong. Not safe for the developing baby. Corbo might not know what to look for, so she had to do it. Two would be quicker than one, anyway. If they didn't find fuel, they and the baby, might not survive.

Mouse and rat tracks ran to and from the snack machine. Over in one corner, hid behind some buckets, was a twenty-five-gallon tank. She touched it, and pushed against it. It didn't move.

"Found it."

Corbo came over with the wheelbarrow full of drink bottles. "I'll take these to the vehicles first. Be right back."

Livia took a deep breath. She opened the intake valve to be sure it smelled like gas, and appeared mixed up enough to use. The liquid rose almost to the top of the opening. If the combination was right, and it wasn't mixed with oil, or something else in the shop, it would be enough for the trip.

When Corbo came back, it took both of them to balance the unwieldy rusty tank in the rickety wheelbarrow. Livia grabbed the fuel hoses nearby, and sat them on top. They pushed and pulled the load through the door.

"I'll come back and close it," she said.

"Should we bother?"

"Yes. Gas and oil are dangerous to the creatures. Don't want anything bigger than the rats and mice gnawing in. Besides, the owners may come back some day."

Corbo grunted as they pulled the tank across the embankment. "Should we leave them a letter?"

"No. Don't think so."

"They'll have our fingerprints." Corbo panted from the exertion.

"When people come back, they'll have so much more to worry about. We'll be sure Corporal Eagle Eye has it noted, so they can take care of any problems in the future. After all, we aren't doing it for us. And the military wouldn't be here, if the situation didn't require it."

Corbo glanced at the vehicle. The men were almost finished connecting the gas tank to the vehicle.

"We'll be at Florence soon. The Army needs more soldiers for when people come back. Who knows, they may even use some of the prisoners to help rebuild the town," Livia said.

"I only want to look for one person," Corbo said.

"We'll find your dad. If he's there." Livia reached up and patted his shoulder. "Besides if he isn't there, maybe someone will remember him, or know about him. It's been so many years, it'd be paper documents, instead of computerized."

Corbo laughed. "That would be great. Don't know about you, I'm ready to stay somewhere for a while."

"So am I. Of all the towns we've seen, where would you want to live?"

"Oh, I don't know. How 'bout the solar subdivision near Tuba City?"

"Sounds good. I think we'd fit right in." She laughed. Those strange people needed help learning to live as much as Corbo needed help being legalized.

It wasn't long before the vehicle was ready to be filled with gas. They wheeled the empty tank back to the building.

Livia closed the door and locked it. A piece of leather covered her pregnant belly, and protected it from the jagged glass shards as she crawled out the window. She leaned a board against the broken window to cover the hole, and prevent birds from flying in.

The journey to Florence would be extremely stressful. They would pass through many towns. Wild animals and loose grazing herds of cattle might be crossing the roads, if they could be seen through the billowing dust and ash storms. There had been no

shaking for a day or two, and no new signs of volcanic activity north of them. Future eruptions could happen without warning.

She grabbed Corbo's arm. "Give me a gun to. I'll watch as well."

Corbo laughed. "You couldn't shoot, could you?"

"Well, in the Wild West show I used to play in, we shot noise guns. Might not be able to hit anything. I could scare a person, or animal," Livia said.

"Dangerous as always." Corbo said. "All right let me see what I can find."

He shifted through the gun pile on the floor. He pulled out a small flare gun, and handed it to Livia. "This otta do the trick. Similar to what you're used to?"

Livia examined the gun. "Almost the exact same thing. It'll be perfect."

Avondale ended, and Phoenix began without a sign of change. Dust covered the edges of the roadway. The road so far had been clear of debris, at least in the center. Late afternoon shadows stretched from buildings across littered parking lots. A pair of wolves howled as they passed. Other unrecognizable wildlife gamboled far off in the distance.

They reached an area where the houses weren't so close to the road, and could relax, at least a little. The going was slow, as the drivers watched for potholes, and tried to maintain a close distance to each other. They turned back east. Before long, they reached an area with houses on both sides.

"We're going to the Army base tonight," Kestrel said. "Tomorrow we'll take you to where you want to go. Not sure what you will find there, and if the person you are searching for has been, or will be, there."

Livia figured as much, as it was almost dark. It would be too late to visit the immigration detention center.

"How far would it be tomorrow?" Corbo asked.

"About three miles," Kestrel said. "We'll have to check out all the prisons in town, the courthouse, and the immigration detention center. It's no problem for us to drop you off first thing in the morning. Not sure how many other vehicles will join us in checking on the facilities. They want one vehicle to check each facility each day. That's why we're going. They need us, and more vehicles."

"We appreciate you taking us along," Livia said.

"No problem," Kestrel said. "Hope you find your dad Corbo. I know what it's like to have no memory of a father."

The sun began to sink as they passed through the outskirts of Florence. Before long, they reached the gates of the Army base. Everyone stepped out of the vehicles, taking the guns and ammunition with them. It wouldn't be safe to leave them in the vehicles, even here on the base. Perhaps particularly here, as raiders would come here looking for weapons.

The base soldiers led them to a candlelit dining hall. At least the food, what little there was, was hot.

A commotion interrupted their meal. Scrambled voices were raised. Followed by a silence that spread throughout the room.

Livia stopped chewing to see who had caused the commotion.

Corbo put his hand on her arm.

Within minutes, a uniformed soldier pushed through the door, and the crowd stepped back. All chatter stopped. The people focused on the man who strode through the door.

"Colonel Rogers already ate." A soldier nearby dropped his fork to the floor.

Colonel Rogers walked to the center of the room, and waited until all eyes were on him. He glanced around the room. "We have visitors tonight. Decisions must be made."

He walked over to Livia and Corbo. "Corporal Eagle Eye says you are aware of the geological happenings. We aren't telling the citizens, because there's nothing we, or they, can do."

"I wish we could help," Livia said.

"I've helped Alex and Amber in researching the fault lines and volcanoes in New Mexico," Corbo said.

"Good. The bad news is the recent quakes have caused Yellowstone to grow in an unprecedented manner. We think, since the lava dome is half-full, the eruption shouldn't be as large. However, the disease ridden tent cities don't have time to be re-evacuated."

"They'd have to return to places that are too dangerous to live at the moment," Corbo said. "More people will die if another quake happens, and a building falls on them."

Livia grabbed Corbo's hand and took a deep breath. "So those of us who are here may be all that survive."

Corporal Rogers glanced at her, then around the room. Everyone was quiet, listening, and waiting. "Right now it's the heat of summer. Yellowstone is expected to erupt south of its last cone location. It could be some time in the next week, or month. Winter will come early this year. We may have a real winter here. Snow,

and a lot of it, may fall regularly."

The soldier stood, and let that sink in a moment.

"Can you imagine a heavy snow in southern Arizona?" Echoed around the room.

Shock registered on their faces. A confused babble ensued.

Colonel Rogers raised his hand for silence. "We know the results of a large volcanic eruption. Extra-long, hard winters for two, to three years. Shortened growing seasons. Hunger, starvation, and extinction of many plants and animals. No one should panic. You should be safe here. As safe as anywhere." Colonel Rogers looked around the room.

The room filled with loud chatter.

"Will the volcanic eruption stop global warming?"

"What about our families?"

"We sent them to safety or so we thought."

"What about our government?"

"Where are the leaders?"

Colonel Rogers cleared his throat. "Sorry I can't answer your questions right now. I don't have all the answers. Please remain calm."

Livia's head whirled. Her parents could be anywhere in an unknown, unnamed tent city. She had no siblings. All she had left was Corbo, and their unborn child. She gripped his hand, and gazed deep into his face. If Corbo ever left her, she'd be alone with a baby coming.

Chapter 40

Florence, Arizona

"Don't leave me." Livia buried her head on Corbo's shoulder.

He held her close. "I won't leave you. I'll be here."

Corbo barely remembered that night. He stayed awake and thought all night long. Moonlight crept across the walls and ceiling.

The sun peeked into the room they were staying in. They got up bleary-eyed and sleepy. A hot breakfast in the cafeteria might be their last. Food was low here, as were fuel supplies.

Before long, a group of soldiers walked up to him. "You're to go with us today. Another group is going to check out one of the prisons downtown. We're to go straight to the immigration detention center, drop you off, and provide a soldier change."

Corbo grabbed his backpack, and crutches. He stood up and helped Livia up. She was pale and tired. It had been a long few months. Now, all the waiting, and worry should be almost over. Instead, a new journey was about to begin.

She smiled up at him weakly. She took his hand, and soon they were on their way. The last three miles.

The town of Florence was less deserted than many of the towns they had been in. A few people walked here and there.

"Several people stayed here to guard the prisons," Kestrel said. "So Florence has more people than many other nearby towns. Will you stay here?"

"We had talked about going back to northern Arizona," Corbo said. "It might be safer to stay here for a year or two. We can always go north later."

"Good idea." Kestrel turned into a long drive. "Almost there."

Corbo stiffened. The excitement, fear, and the unknown were almost more than he could bear, having known about his father for only a few months. He had no idea what to expect, or if his father even knew that he existed. And now, he was going to meet him. His father would be meeting him and Livia both for the first time, if he could be found.

He took a deep breath as the vehicle came to stop. His hands shook as he opened the door.

Livia squeezed his hand, and looked into his eyes, trying to smile.

"It's not so bad," Kestrel said. "We'll be going with you."

Livia took his hand, and followed the soldiers toward the building.

"Wait." Corbo's voice shook. "I need to find the papers your mom gave me."

He sat down in the middle of the parking lot to paw through his backpack. Down near the bottom, he felt it. The plastic bag he had zipped the precious copies into. They weren't the originals. They'd have to do.

He pulled the pages out of the packet. They were legal documents, maybe copies of copies. The originals would have declared his aunt Anna, uncle Jon, and his mom and dad as legal citizens. On the top page, the one for his dad, dark spots smeared the words. Stains, probably from the tears of Livia's mom when she was a teen, abandoned by the man she had grown to love so quickly.

As he stuffed the pages back in, a strand of the locket's chain, fell into his hand. His hands shook as he opened it. On one side was a man, who resembled him. Dark haired, though lighter skinned than he was. On the other side was a beautiful young woman, much like Livia. It must have been her mother once, before she settled for Livia's dad.

Livia's hand rested on his shoulder, and he glanced up to her. She had tears in her eyes. Her mouth moved. No words came out.

Papers and locket grasped firmly in his hands, he struggled to stand up. Corbo put his arm around her shoulder. This bond between them, and their parents, would keep them together. Something they could both touch that had belonged to both of their parents.

Unlike the homes he had grown up in, the building didn't feel alive, it imposed a heavy presence on the landscape. Sharp corners, and mirrors reflected light into their eyes. It reminded Corbo of a place where people went to die, or a well-lit tomb, like one cemetery building he had hidden in years before, while traveling alone.

There was a good chance his dad had died years ago, either here, or somewhere near.

He walked up to the door.

It swung open and a soldier he didn't know came out. "No entry."

Corbo grimaced. Did this man think he didn't know English well? "We came with the relief crew. I had to stop for my papers." He held

them up.

"Sorry young man. Orders and all. Sometimes I forget when I have an overriding order." The man held the door open, and ushered Corbo and Livia in.

"The lady at the counter, Ms. Ida, should be able to help you."

Corbo clutched the papers. He wasn't sure he trusted his voice. It might crack any moment.

Ms. Ida was busy talking to a soldier. Corbo didn't want to intrude, though he was in a hurry to find his father. Perhaps by waiting, she would help him. Maybe even now, she was discussing who his father might be with the soldier.

The sparse waiting room was crowded with cold, plastic chairs scattered about, some in lines, some in circles. In a corner, plastic toddler books, and a few cloth dolls had been dropped as if a toddler had ran from the room moments before. Walls were covered in signs in various languages, many of which Corbo didn't recognize.

"How can I help you?"

Corbo glanced.

Ms. Ida, and the unknown soldier, stared at him and Livia.

At that moment, he wished he could hide behind her. He was twice her size. Livia had done so much for him already. She could negotiate finding his dad as well. Her vocabulary was more formal, and other people respected her more than him, by looks alone.

Livia shoved him forward. "You can do it."

He whimpered and stepped forward, with her at his side. His heels clicked on the tile floor, echoing in the silence.

"Say something," Livia said.

"I'm Corbo. I'm here to find my father."

The woman tapped her fingernails on the counter.

Of course, she knew why he was there. No one else would be allowed in here in the near future without prior approval and knowledge.

"What do you have?" Her perfect white teeth peeked through her smile.

Corbo handed her the zipped plastic bag, not wanting to let go of it.

Ms. Ida took the bag, opened it, and flipped through the pages. "Computers and such are down. Too bad everything was digitalized a few years ago. Otherwise, we'd have a better chance."

She glanced back up at him. "In the past, we have had about four hundred illegal immigrants here at a time. We don’t have many

right now. I'll come around the corner to listen to your story." Ms. Ida handed the plastic bag back to Corbo.

In a few moments, she opened a small doorway, and waved him forward.

He followed her through the door, and they were ushered into a smaller, sterile room. A large oak table dominated the room, and a few colored pages scattered on the floor. He sat on the fake leather couch, with Livia beside him. A soldier stood at the door, watching, and listening.

Ms. Ida sat down, the large wooden table between them. "Okay. Go ahead."

Corbo glanced at the table. Dozens of initials dug deep into the wood. His finger traced an E. "I found out about my father a few months ago. My whole childhood, I grew up believing my aunt and uncle were my parents. Please help me find him."

Ms. Ida nodded, tapped the table, and waited.

Livia squeezed his arm.

Corbo gave her all the details he had, although they were sketchy. "I know it isn't much to go on. There is no knowing what name he may be registered under."

"What names could he be registered under?"

"His real name is Eduardo. He may be under my uncle's name of Jon, or something else, maybe."

"Okay. Corporal Eagle Eye admits knowing you. General Nord said you might come this way."

"You know General Nord?"

"Yes, communications are limited. However, he was afraid we'd shoot on sight, not to mention this is the heaviest guarded section of the state. Without our assistance right now, your life wouldn't be worth much."

"Thanks," Corbo said. "Can you help?"

She glanced at him and Livia. "Try to say thank you to him, if you ever see him again. Now, let's see what we can do."

Ms. Ida stood up and went to the door. "I'll bring you some water, and check a few things first." The woman turned to leave.

"Can I use a restroom?" Livia asked. "I've been stressed lately."

"Come along. It's that door there. The guard will watch you both. I'll be back soon," the woman said.

Corbo reviewed the pages more closely than he ever had before. He held the locket in his hand, and squeezed it, as if hoping to find some answer hidden deep within.

A strange noise like coughing, or choking echoed down the hall.

The guard didn't move.

Corbo pulled the pages closer. The date the papers had been approved was clearly marked, a few months before his birth. The approval process was far simpler twenty years ago than today. It was a full generation, a lifetime for him.

Livia slipped back in beside him, paler than before. She carried two water bottles.

"You okay?"

"Breakfast didn't agree with me. It hasn't for a few days. I was hungry this morning."

He hugged her. "Hope you feel better soon."

"I do, being beside you." Livia patted his hand and pulled the pages to her. "Anything we missed here?"

"I don't think so."

The guard coughed.

An elderly man peeked around the doorway.

"Hello? Corbo?"

Corbo's heart leapt. This couldn't be his father, could it?

The man walked in and around the table. He sat down. "I'm known as Chaplain Greg here. Maybe I can help you."

"Can you find my dad?"

"Tell me your story," the man said.

Corbo told his story. This time he mentioned the date on the pages.

"I may know someone. We have two people here from around the time of the raid you mentioned. One of them may know your father."

Corbo wanted to jump up, run around the table, and hug the man.

"Can we see them?"

Chaplain Greg held up his hand. "Not so fast. The usual red tape cutting wouldn't work. With General Nord's permission, and request, you will meet them. Jonny was hurt again, in a riot here right after the power went out. We can go see him. He may not be able to communicate. He is recovering with the best medicine we have available right now."

Chaplain Greg stood up. "You must be aware, there is little chance either man will know your father. Are you sure you want to get your hopes up?"

"We have to," Livia whispered. "For Corbo. And my mom. I

promised."

"Stay strong. Come with me," Chaplain Greg said.

They followed the chaplain down the candle-lined hallway. The soldier followed behind them. He turned down another hall, past more doors. At last, he stopped and waited.

"This man is named Jonny. He was found without identification, and has never remembered his true name. His head was bashed in, and no one expected him to live. He used to talk in Spanish, primarily. Until a few weeks ago, his English had greatly improved. We went through a lengthy process to have him accepted as a citizen, and to work here with us."

Corbo waited. This could be the moment. This Jonny could know his dad. This might even be his dad. He had to find a way to reach into his mind.

Chaplain Greg opened the door.

Corbo took a deep breath and looked in. At first, he saw nothing other than darkness. His eyes adjusted. A pale sheet covered the outline of a body.

Chaplain Greg walked toward the form with a candle in his hand.

Corbo gritted his teeth, clutched the packet of letters in one hand, the locket in the other, and walked through the door.

Chapter 41

Perry Oklahoma to Tinker Air Force Base, Oklahoma

Amber sang nursery rhymes to Tam and Joe as she helped them prepare to leave in the morning. The word from the soldiers was to expect the normal three hour, two hundred mile trip, to take double that. With a supervolcano about to erupt a little over one thousand miles away, and the not so slumbering one in New Mexico, anywhere on the continent was a dangerous place to be. She didn't want to worry Tam and Joe about something no one had any control over.

Worry lines appeared on Tam's forehead. "Will we see the explosion?"

"You aren't supposed to know." Amber held her finger to her lips and glancing at Joe.

"We heard. Will we?"

Amber took the little girl into her arms, resting her head on her shoulder.

Tam waited for an answer.

"Dear child, we won't see Yellowstone's explosion. I don't think we will see anything at first. Maybe, not at all. Dust and ash may cover large parts of the planet afterwards. Then we may have really beautiful sunsets."

"What else."

Amber stared off into space, not seeing, or hearing, the bustling around her.

"There will be noise, loud booms. We will hear them." She snuggled Tam closer as Joe crawled over to them.

"Will the earth shake again?" Joe asked.

The shaking could be bad, as the eastern part of the continent, over four-fifths, ripped away from the western fifth. California might not fall into the ocean. With volcanoes on both sides, it could become a drifting island and would drift away, northwest, over the next few millennia.

"Come on, let's go," Alex said. "It's going to be a long trip. "

She wiped her eyes, and sat Tam down.

Tam and Joe grabbed their bags, and ran to the vehicle.

Alex helped Amber up, holding Ellie to the side.

"They know," she said.

He laughed. "Like we could keep it from them when the booms occur, or the ash falls."

"Do you think any will reach this far?"

"Depends on the winds. At least a little. We may not notice it," Alex said. "The sky is clear right now."

He hugged her close as they walked to the vehicle.

They rode in silence for a few hours. Holding on to each other and the children as the vehicle traversed back part of the way they had come the day before. Potholes were everywhere. Soon, they turned south. Before long, they reached an area where the pavement was wet.

"Looks like rain came through here. That's good," Monty said. "We'll be in Perry before long. A quick stop there, and then on to Oklahoma City."

A line of trees in the distance leaned, as if they had been shoved aside by giant's hands swiping across the plains. The sun blazed. Shimmering water retreated as fast as they drove across the pavement. The tree's leaves and trunks appeared to be trying to right themselves, reaching upward. Limbs pointed the opposite way of how they had grown. It would take months, or years, to reach the new path to sunlight.

After they passed the line of trees, Amber gasped at the devastation. Ahead were buildings, or former buildings. The remains of concrete, walls, and furnishings scattered across the landscape.

Monty stopped in front of a bed upright in the middle of the road.

Amber helped Tam and Joe out of the vehicle.

The scene was worse than the hospital after the earthquake. This wasn't earthquake damage, at least not in its finality.

She reached down and picked up a few splinters that lay on the ground.

Nearby, a board with an impaled giant ocean picture rested on the ground. Remnants of curtains, bedspreads, and papers fluttered on the ground, and in the low lying shrubs.

"A third of a mile of destruction." Alex pulled her close. "Tornadoes are deadly here. Hope no one was around."

The soldiers from the vehicles walked through the remains scattered about the road.

"We found something." One soldier shouted.

"What?"

"The driver from the third vehicle."

Amber turned her head into Alex's shoulder. Those men could be alive and loose, or dead, and buried in the rubble.

"Is he alive?" The driver said.

The soldier shook her head.

"Hurry, we need to be on the road."

"We have to check further."

Amber held Tam and Joe.

Alex stood nearby.

The soldiers argued. If the truck drivers had escaped, the people in Webb City should be informed.

She didn't want to wait to find out.

"Their leader is dead over here." Another soldier shouted. "No sign of the other two."

"Good. Everyone ready?" Monty climbed down off a hill of debris.

Amber breathed a sigh of relief.

Within minutes, they were back on the road, playing dodge the debris.

As they passed the former hotel foundations, she thought she saw a shadow move. It could have been nothing more than the wind waving a partially caught curtain or bedspread. It sent tingles up her spine.

The road showed signs of the strain the earth was under. Buckling in places, with local waterways and reservoirs either drained, or out of their banks. They passed over two small streams that covered the roadway.

Oklahoma City stretched out in front of them.

Monty slowed down, and picked through the abandoned vehicles, alert for raiders, and sudden changes in road condition.

Amber's nerves were as on edge as everyone's. She watched out the window with Tam and Joe's help. No people had been seen, which was a good thing, perhaps. No major signs of looting. Many cars had their hoods lifted. Amber saw movement behind a semi and pointed.

As the driver crept by, a flock of vultures ascended from a small dog carcass. Everyone took a deep breath of relief. Sad for the dog, glad it wasn't raiders.

"We'll reach the major river soon," the driver said. "Not sure what we will find."

As they approached the bridge, the number of vehicles

abandoned increased. Stalled vehicles blocked the bridge entrance. They could go no further in the southbound lanes.

Monty stopped and walked back to the other vehicle.

Within moments, they backed up. Monty hurried back. He pulled the vehicle across the median, and drove southbound on the shoulder of the vehicle-littered northbound lanes. At the bridge, Monty stopped the vehicle.

Everyone else got out to walk across. The bridge appeared stable. Constant strain from the weight of the abandoned vehicles, especially a wide load carrying a giant piece of heavy metal, could have weakened the supports. As they walked, damage to the southbound bridge became more visible. It could collapse anytime. No water flowed between the two segments of bridge.

Amber held Ellie, and kept Tam and Joe in front of her. She tried to smile, hoping they wouldn't notice her fear.

Once they reached the other side, and were well out of the way, Monty drove across, weaving between vehicles.

The bridge creaked and groaned. It shook and swayed.

He made it across, and on down the road.

The second driver crept up to the edge of the bridge. He followed Monty's pattern.

The bridge let out a loud crack.

Amber closed her eyes and pulled Tam and Joe to her so they couldn't watch.

Wind whistled by her, as the thunder of the bridge collapsed in front of her. Particles of dust and debris hit her skin. The sound of crashing metal and concrete resounded off the dry riverbed below.

"He made it," Alex said.

"Did you see the bridge push the back end up, as it hit the vehicle before falling?"

Everyone was clamoring, and glad both vehicles made it across. There would be no going back from here either.

As they scrambled back into the vehicles clapping and cheering, Amber was glad the ride was almost over. Soon, she could rest and find her bearings. Her old dreams were shattered. She needed to find new ones.

Ellie cried.

"Hush Ellie, we'll be there soon." Amber rocked the baby, and she quieted down.

Alex reached over and patted Ellie's cheek.

"The kids have been so good. Maybe we can stay at the next

base for a while."

Amber shifted her backpack. "I hope for a place without so much concrete. A place we can grow food, homes, and a future."

"Growing homes? Now that is a concept. How can we grow our homes?"

Amber laughed. "Not sure. People used to use recyclable materials to make homes. When a home fell apart, they could burn the debris for heat the next winter. Couldn’t do that with modern homes."

"Suppose not. All the chemicals would make a toxic cloud."

"Part of the use once, and throw away culture. Thing is, there's nowhere to throw it away anymore."

"We'll find a way." Alex squeezed her shoulder.

A group of about thirty soldiers met them at the base gates. At first, the din of voices was too high to understand the conversations going on.

Ellie cried and yowled as Amber grabbed the bags, including the one with the last few cans of formula.

Diana, a visibly pregnant soldier, wobbled up to Amber and reached out for Ellie. "Hi Amber, what happened?"

Amber held Ellie close, not letting her go. "Tired. Need to make formula for her." Diana was one of Dena's many nieces. The wedding in Elmore City seemed so long ago now. It had settled so far back, like her memory of Livia, Karen, and even her mom. Would time ever move normally again?

"Come on, I'll show you around," Diana said.

Before long, they were seated in a cafeteria with the infant settling for her formula.

"At least she eats well."

"Her mom died giving birth to her. Her name was Kelly," Amber said.

"At least she found someone who can care for her."

"On the road, it's tough. I'm about out of formula. No idea where to find more." Amber nodded to the bag on the table.

"If you leave her with me, I'll take care of her."

"I can't leave her. Tam and Joe, orphans also, take good care of her." Amber adjusted Ellie as she slurped the bottle.

"My baby is due in a few days. I'm going to the ranch soon. It's all the family I have left. Aunt Dena would take us all in."

"What about your job here?"

Amber burped Ellie.

"They are going to send us somewhere, that's all I know. I can't go, because of my baby. If you could take mine and feed them both, then I might have to. Since you can't, I can go home to my aunt."

"That would be wonderful," Amber said. "It was so nice there. I didn't want to leave. With the latest news, I don't want to be any further west, or north, than I have to be."

Diana put her hand on Amber's. "I don't blame you. Let me find out if I can go with you."

"Monty would have to go out of the way, then."

"That's okay. We have plenty of vehicles, and enough fuel, for our group to make it there."

Alex walked into the room with Tam and Joe. "You two go eat a snack. We'll be leaving soon."

"Diana wants to come with us, and go back to Elmore City."

"A good reason to go there." He carried a tray of food over from the prep area.

"Our food is about to run out, that's the last of it." Diana returned and sat down.

"We'll find more." Alex took a big bite of vegetables. He chewed, swallowed, and said, "About half this group will be sent to Tuttle. The other half will go on with us. I'm sure they won't mind a short stopover."

Amber laughed. "They'll scare poor Dena. She'll think they are coming to take her check."

Alex gazed deep into her eyes before. "At least they can tell her there won't be any more checks. Maybe she'll believe them." He stuffed another bite into his mouth.

Chapter 42

Tinker Air force Base to Elmore City, Oklahoma

Alex snuggled up next to Amber, and listened as Diana told stories about the base, and her life before the quakes began. It all sounded so simple. Fix and fly planes, practice maneuvers, and enemy target search. Now, bombing the enemy would only make the situation worse. And, where would anyone start? Yellowstone, Valles Caldera, and hundreds of ruptured earthquake faults were the enemy now.

Monty pulled up in front of the house and circle of travel trailers. They were five vehicles now, instead of three.

Naomi ran around from the back of the house. She screamed, and fell to the ground.

Alex leaped out and grabbed her. "It's okay. It's me. See, Amber is here."

Amber stepped out carrying Ellie. "It's okay. Where is your mom?"

Naomi, still on the ground, pointed to the house.

The whole group they had left behind stood there, except Dena.

"It's okay." Amber stood up. "I need to see Dena. Diana is with me."

Dena stepped out through the door. She ambled through the crowd.

Diana stood by the vehicle door.

Dena ran to her, hugged her, and cried.

After a few moments, Dena stood back holding Diana's shoulders. "Come on around, you all must be starving. George will have to feed you all."

George laughed. "Come along."

They trooped behind the house. Brick corners had been erected, with a large wall positioned across the top. It was high enough to walk under. A fireplace was at one end, tables and chairs clustered all around.

"Sorry there aren't enough seats," Dena said. "We don't expect much company."

"Will there be enough food?" Amber asked.

"No," Dena said. "There aren't any more pans, either. So two choices. Do you want to eat a partial plate now, and a second later? Or eat in two shifts?"

The families and the soldiers waited, watching each other. Monty stepped up. "I think most of us would like to have a snack now, and eat more later. Perhaps Diana, Alex, and a few others who suffered serious injury a few days back may need to eat more now, and a snack later. We have food to add to the soup."

Alex groaned. "I'm mostly better Dena. I, and few others, were hit with tear gas. Diana needs her strength."

"My baby and I'll last as long you," Diana said.

Dena laughed. "Well then, it's settled. Everyone, bring what you can. We need to feed the kids. We adults have enough fat to tide us over. It'll take an hour or so."

People chatted as the food cooked.

Tam and Joe played with the children of the community Dena was building from her relatives and friends. They ran back to check on Amber and Ellie from time to time.

Dena had held baby Ellie and pronounced her perfect for a newborn.

"Kids, time to eat!" Dena ladled out soup into the available bowls. She made sure the smallest kids had enough to fill them, as they might fall asleep before a second batch was ready. Her laughter and smiles lit up the makeshift patio. Tam and Joe ran to join the other children at a long wooden table made from old doors.

"Amber, it's been wonderful since you all were here," Dena said. "I've had so much fun. Only working a few hours a day." She glanced at the soldiers.

Alex went over to Monty. "Can you talk to Dena? She is terrified of losing her check if she does any work."

He laughed. "She's doing plenty now. This soup sure tastes good."

"I know. That's the problem. She's the cook. Her immune disorder, she worries."

"I'll put her mind at ease. If checks ever start back up, no report of what is going on here will be made." Monty stood up, and walked to where Dena helped prepare the next batch of soup. It wouldn't be much. No one knew how much food there was at the moment.

George came over. "We've took apart a few of the abandoned houses. The ones in the worst condition. And, we've planted crops in a nearby field. I know where a few are that will be ready to harvest

soon too."

"It'll help," Alex said.

"You don't think there will be trouble?" George stacked the children's empty plates.

"No. I don't think anyone is coming back." Alex handed Goldie a scrap of vegetable.

"I think Dena knows. I hope so," George said.

Alex reached out his hand. "Is the community strong here?"

"Sure is. Hope it stays that way." George looked off in the distance.

"So do I."

"You haven't said much about your trip." He wiped the crumbs off the table.

Alex sat his empty bowl down. "The news isn't good. I don't want to worry people. There is nothing they can do to change anything, or fix it."

Tam ran up. "Why is the stone yellow? And what is it doing?"

A sudden hush swept across the open-air room.

Everyone waited on him.

Alex stood up. "My friends, we brought Diana home."

He pulled Tam close to his side. "Amber and I hope to stay here as well, with the three orphans we found."

The gathered families and soldiers nodded and smiled.

"We brought bad news as well. Yellowstone has seen a sudden pressure change, due to the folds here, and in New Mexico."

A few women gasped, and men closed their eyes.

"The good news is; an eruption now would not be near as terrible as one in the future. The bad news is; it may rip the continent further apart."

"We should be safe here?" James, Dena's brother, asked.

"Safer than those who didn't stay."

A few women cried as they realized people they knew, family, friends, and co-workers, would never come home from the evacuation camps.

"We have a lot to do to prepare this place for winter. And, build homes for myself and Amber, as well as Diana, and anyone else living in a travel trailer."

The families cheered.

"Of course."

"You are welcome."

"We can have a place up in a few days. Then the other homes

soon," George said. "Cannibalizing from falling apart neighbor homes what we need, if the soldiers agree."

"We all have to do what has to be done to survive right now," Monty said.

As the group settled back down Amber came over to him, hugged him and said, "Thank you everyone. Tam and Joe have been a wonderful help to us, and will be a great addition to the community. Ellie will have a place to call home."

"What about the soldiers?"

Monty laughed. "We will stay tonight. Then, we have to go on to Fort Sill. Good luck to everyone here. Alex and Amber will be missed. We know where to find you, if we need you."

"Can you send Fortune and Crispy to us? They stayed with the cowherd at Alma with Sharon, Mary, and Ralph."

"Sure can," Monty said. "Who knows, maybe traveling cowboys will become popular, for a while anyway."

The soldiers, Amber, and Alex settled down for the night under the pavilion. Coyotes called in the distance.

"I wish I knew where Karen and Tom are," Alex said.

"I know. I worry about them too." Amber snuggled closer.

There would be no privacy tonight, maybe soon.

Alex felt a low vibration deep inside his head. It grew larger and louder.

He jumped up, grabbed Amber, and yelled, "Let's go."

Before long, everyone stood shaking, outside the shelter. Another boom, and the ground shifted a bit.

"Yellowstone erupted." Or, perhaps Valles Caldera. Alex turned away.

"Do you think the shelter is safe?"

"Check the supports," Alex said.

Amber ran for her bag. It was dark, and the stars were visible, except a few in one small corner. She pulled out her pillowcase, shook it out, and held it over the dying fire embers. "I should draw the changes in."

Alex reached for a charred stick from the fireplace. He took the pillowcase and drew a few lines, placing a few more dots along the way. "I think it looks like this."

He took her in his arms and held her close. "We will never know. Someday, maybe our descendants will."

"I miss my mom and Dr. Rebecca. I even miss Corbo and Livia. We never did find them."

He held her close. "They may be safe. I wonder if my dad and Dr. Evan made it to Yellowstone in time? They only had two days."

"They may have," Amber said. "We can hope."

One of the new soldiers came over. "You know a Livia and Corbo?"

"Yes," Alex said.

"I have some news." The soldier then told Alex about them making it to the ranger station, and the plan to release the wild animals.

"I wish I had thought of that," Amber said.

The soldier laughed. "You were busy corralling new wild animals. Don't worry, the ones close to the bases are being released, or already have been. Diana planned the release of the Oklahoma City Zoo."

"That's great. I always thought Livia was smart, and would live up to any cause she wanted."

"I never met her. She made quite the impression on General Nord."

"I'd say so." Alex laughed. "I think Amber will have the longest lasting impression."

"Hardly," Amber said.

"Truly. You are calm, sweet, and build everything in your path. That will be remembered long after we are gone." Alex hugged her close.

"I'm going to leave you two love birds alone." The soldier walked off.

Alex reached over to kiss Amber, and enjoyed how she relaxed in his arms. Maybe a short walk, beyond the house would be nice. He reached for a lighted stick from the fireplace; a little light to scare off the wild animals. They couldn't wander far, or they might become lost.

She held his hand as he led her off from the group, clutching the pillowcase close.

"It's all I have of my family, my past."

"We'll bury it somewhere safe. Somewhere you can always find it." He bent over and kissed her.

Alex found a nice quiet spot. He sat down, and pulled her into his lap, and kissed her forehead.

Amber tried to say something.

He kissed her lips and whispered, "Later."

Chapter 43

Florence, Arizona

Livia walked into the tiny room behind Corbo.

It was too dark to see well. Chaplain Greg picked up a candle in the hallway, and carried it in with him.

The man on the bed shifted position. The sweat on his face shone in the candle light. Eyes opened, then flickered shut. Hands grasped the sheet, and he rolled back over, toward the wall.

"Jonny, this young man thinks he may be your son. Do you have a child who would be an adult?"

The man did not respond.

Corbo stood, rooted to the spot, barely breathing.

Livia reached for his hand. "Let me try."

She sat beside the bed and reached out to the man. "Jonny, what is your real name? Who are you?"

He groaned as he rolled back over. His face was blank of emotion.

The face that greeted Livia made her want to jump back. She didn't dare offend him. The eyes were sunken in their sockets, one cheekbone was missing, and the cave in around his mouth indicated many teeth were missing as well. His face was so bruised, she couldn't tell which were old, and which were new injuries.

Livia patted the bedside. "Please, we want to help."

The man grunted and one hand moved out from under the covers. He lifted Livia's chin. He made a sound, let go of her chin, and peered up at Corbo. "Na."

Jonny glanced at Chaplain Greg.

"Can you leave us the candle, and step out in the hall?" Livia said to Chaplain Greg.

"Normally no. However, in this case, a few minutes is okay," he said.

Chaplain Greg handed the candle to Corbo. His boots resounded on the floor, and out the door.

Corbo sat down beside Livia.

Livia glanced from Corbo to Jonny on the bed. "Eduardo?"

The man opened his eyes wide and groaned.

Livia leaned closer. "Were you Eduardo's friend?"

The man opened his eyes and flicked his lashes up and down. He lifted his arm and brushed Livia's cheek.

"Mom never mentioned him having a friend go with him, maybe he did."

"She may not have known," Corbo said. "Jonny, do you know my dad?"

The man looked from one to the other, and touched their faces. Something about both of them had sparked a buried memory. His eyes shone. He spoke no more words.

"I wish I could reach in, and hear what your brain is thinking. What are seeing? What are you hearing? Did you know mom?"

His eyes were large. The man glanced at them both, though the effort exhausted him. His eyes almost closed.

"Are you okay in there?" Chaplain Greg asked outside the door.

"Sure. A moment more." Livia looked at the sunken face, the withered hands, the wasted, broken body. Nothing like Corbo. No resemblance to his Aunt Anna either. She touched the man's hand. "I'm Livia. I have to go now." She stood, took the candle, and packet of papers.

Corbo stood up.

The man reached out and touched her belly. There was a smile on his face.

Her weight gain hadn't really registered before. It had been too gradual. Her pregnancy would be visible to some now, at least in this outfit.

The man rolled over and faced the wall, drawing the covers over his head.

Livia's cheeks burned as she walked out into the hallway carrying the candle.

"Not him?"

"No. No resemblance to Corbo, or his aunt. Something touched him, or a memory. He seemed to recognize something about both of us. His eyes shone. Maybe Corbo's dad took a friend with him?"

"Could be." Chaplain Greg walked down the hall. "It would have been safer to go alone. Sometimes alone, you are more alert; and less likely to be ambushed."

Livia handed Corbo the packet of papers and took his other hand.

"I'm not sure about anything right now," Corbo said.

Chaplain Greg stopped at a corner. "I won't say a word about

your religious choices, or beliefs," he whispered. "What I will say is Jonny has been known to predict many things without words. Upcoming babies and troubles are his usual predictions."

"Trouble abounds lately."

"What trouble, and what blessings, have you brought with you?"

"Yellowstone is the trouble now," Corbo said.

"Thought as much. Did you bring a blessing to?" He glanced at Livia.

Her face reddened. The heat burned. Her breathing became difficult. The candle almost slipped out of her hand and the chaplain caught it.

"It's okay. Sometimes better to wait and be sure. The next man isn't scheduled to work today. He may be in the next building."

Livia squeezed Corbo's hand as Chaplain Greg turned away.

The chaplain opened the door and they walked outside.

It was hot. The sun reverberated off the roof, and several metal pieces lying loose on the ground.

Livia fanned her face as she avoided the debris between the buildings.

"We had some wind the other day, and no one here to fix things. They are going to move most of the prisoners out of here soon."

"Where too?" Corbo moved a piece of what looked like a mobile home roof.

"One of the larger state prisons. They are trying to figure how to bring everyone together. The better to feed and guard them."

"And the easier for uprisings," Livia said.

"They know that. I don't know their plan, or how they intend to implement it," Chaplain Greg said.

"What about Jonny, and the other man who may be my dad?"

"Since both work here, and live in the immigrant community behind the fence, they'll stay here. Jonny may stay in the building for a while, until, and if, he can walk and talk again."

"Would my papers prove who my dad is?"

"I wish. Thing is, even in good times, it could be a ten-year court battle, and it would be tough to prove that those papers should have been with him twenty years ago," Chaplain Greg said.

"So, no way to prove who he, or I, am then," Corbo said.

"It's not so bad. I think things are changing, and it won't matter anymore," Chaplain Greg said.

"It won't come soon enough," Corbo said. "I want to stay here. I always thought I was born here, and it was shock to find out

otherwise."

"Chaplain."

Four soldiers rounded the corner between the buildings.

"We need to move the prisoners. We need your help to document. Any luck for these two?"

"Not yet. Taking them to Grandfather Leanardo in the village."

"Not today. We are clearing out the first building, and we need your help. Give them directions. They may find him there."

"I'm sorry." Chaplain Greg gave them a street address and rushed for the door of another building. He fumbled with his keys and didn't glance back.

"Where is the village?" Livia asked.

"On the other side of that building, on Palo Verde Lane," the soldier said.

Livia took Corbo's hand. "Guess we better go. Many people left there?"

"Quite a few." The soldier opened the gate. "Good luck."

They walked through the opening in the fence.

"Well, at least we won't forget the name," Corbo said.

"Nope. The dry dusty day will wear us out. Will we go back to base tonight?"

"Or stay in the immigrant camp." Corbo squeezed her hand.

The heat from his smile was almost as overpowering as the sun's rays glaring down on them.

Her first sight of the immigrant camp was one of defeat. At first glance, it appeared depilated, deserted, and sad. A place where hope no longer lived. Trash, metal sheets, and small animals, littered the open street.

They looked both ways, trying to decide where people might be. They turned left at the first road, and then turned right down the next unnamed street.

An elderly man and a skinny dog rested on a shaded porch.

Livia squeezed Corbo's hand and walked up to him. "How long have you been here?"

The man glanced at her. "Today, or long term?"

"Well, long term, I guess. Where is everyone?"

The man laughed. "Most are inside, napping. Been here a long time. Many years."

Livia waved at the mess on the road around her. "Has it always looked like this?"

"No. Homes being dismantled for fuel here, and at prisons."

Livia sat beside the older man, and patted the dog. The dog glanced at her. "You stay?"

"Have to. Nowhere to go."

"No hope?"

"Hope, yes." The man's eyes shone. "Brother dies. New world opens. I can rest."

The pain this man must be feeling. Livia wanted to reach out to him. She wasn't sure how he would react. Cultural differences were so strong in tiny multicultural villages.

"Corbo and I are searching for his father. Can you help us? Chaplain Greg sent us to find Grandfather Leanardo."

After a glance at Corbo, the man coughed. "Not sure I know him. Come inside. Eat a bit, nap a bit, and talk. Village will wake in a few hours."

The elderly man pulled himself up.

Livia stood up.

The dog lazily stretched into a standing position.

Maybe there weren't any answers.

This man may know Corbo's father. She'd have to wait and listen on his terms. At least they could rest out of the blazing sun until the other inhabitants woke up from their afternoon naps.

Chapter 44

Florence, Arizona

Corbo followed the elderly man, his dog, and Livia into the house.

At first, it appeared dark, after the sun's glare outside. Within moments, he could see. Metal sheets were placed around the room. Similar to mirrors, they illuminated the area as well as possible through the un-curtained window.

They sat on the floor. The elderly gentleman passed them cups of fried beans with a little cornmeal sprinkled on top.

After eating, the man leaned back against a stack of pillows. "Tell me your story."

Corbo felt as if he had always been telling his story. Each time, he hoped it would bring him one-step closer to his father. This man might be able to help. Or, at least be entertained by a story so similar to those he had heard many times before.

The man nodded several times during the re-telling. His eyes closed, and one hand rested on the dog's head. One time, the man opened them enough to glance around at Livia and him. Otherwise, he appeared unaffected.

"So that's why I'm here," Corbo said.

"Good story. Nap a bit. When my neighbors wake up, we'll go." The man stretched out and snored.

So much for quickly finding his father.

Corbo rested with his eyes half open.

Before long, the metal sun catchers no longer glowed. A peaceful dimness loomed.

Sounds of dogs barking, chickens clucking, and children laughing woke him.

Livia sat beside him petting the dog.

The old man was gone.

"We're to wait here a few more minutes," Livia said.

Soon the old man entered the house followed by Kestrel.

"Good to see you. Are you staying here tonight?" Kestrel said.

"We can. We don't want to go back to the base. They may not have room for us, if they haven't forgotten us," Corbo said.

"That's fine," Kestrel said. "I didn't know you knew my uncle. I'm on duty at the Immigrant Detention Center tonight. Let me know, if you need me."

"Thanks," Corbo said.

"Good. We'll have a meeting after dark. Stay here till then, unless you want to explore," the older man said.

"We'd like to walk around a bit, if that's okay," Livia said.

"Sure, go ahead. The adults will be busy, and the kids tend to run wild these days. Be careful." Kestrel said. "Uncle and I have much to discuss."

Outside, the sun's rays slanted, heating the rocks before the chill of the desert night began. Men and women stacked burnable furniture, and other items onto the metal squares, and used them as sleds to drag the scraps along the street. Children, dogs, and chickens stirred up dust devils as they fluttered loudly about in the dusty street.

Livia laughed as a small careless child almost ran into her while tossing balls with friends.

The evening passed as they met and talked to people. The villagers gathered together around a small bonfire where food cooked slowly, in the ancient ways. Livia watched the women, and offered to help them. They shooed her away as if she were a pesky fly, or a tumbling toddler.

"They can't say you didn't try," Corbo said.

"This place is fun. Everyone is so happy."

"I saw their laughter stop, and the kids hid, when the soldiers drove by earlier," Corbo said.

"An uneasy truce. I'm glad they welcomed us." She squeezed his hand and gazed into his eyes.

One woman shouted at someone. The babble of voices in many languages lowered as the people gathered in a line. They picked up bowls out of pile on a board as they reached the cook fires. Corbo and Livia joined near the end, with children jockeying behind them, pushing them forward into the adults.

The noisy meal was soon over. Children and dogs frolicked, and cats hissed or hid. A woman stood up behind the fire and beckoned. The old man, and his dog toddled to her.

"We're asked to help find the father of visitors," the man said.

The crowd murmured.

"See. Think?"

The men and women left an open space around Livia and Corbo.

Murmurs in a dozen languages began. Fingers wagged. Soon everyone focused on the elderly man, and nodded.

"Let them stay until tomorrow Grandfather Leanardo. We will plan," a voice in the crowd said.

"Come Corbo, Livia. Stay tonight." He hobbled off toward his home.

Corbo took a deep breath, and they followed.

"What do they think?" Livia asked.

Grandfather Leanardo waited until they were in the home. Even in the dark, the metal sheets gave a little light.

"They will help," he said.

The man settled down and drifted off to sleep almost immediately.

"I hope they can find him," Livia said.

The man snored in reply.

Corbo pulled Livia close. He drifted into an uneasy sleep and woke with Livia sitting up beside him.

"You okay?"

"An upset stomach. Been that way a few days. All the stress." Livia bent over him. He could easily lose himself in her lovely eyes. She had grown more attractive over the last few months. Even her personality had smoothed, no longer so crusty around the edges.

"Come on. Let's go," Livia reached for his hand.

"What about breakfast?"

"We'll eat later. We have to try to meet Grandfather Leanardo before the soldiers arrive there to empty his building." She pulled his arm.

They reached the building to find Chaplain Greg waiting for them. "Glad you're here early. Yesterday afternoon was a mess."

"What happened?"

The chaplain pulled out his keys to unlock the door. "Too many people moved. More families broken up."

"Their families are in this village, right?"

"Yes, most of them." Chaplain Greg pulled the door open, and ushered them inside.

Livia stepped in the door. She grabbed Corbo's hand and dragged him forward.

The locket grasped in his hand, and papers at his chest, Corbo stepped into the room.

On the floor lay a mat covered with a sheet. Beside it sat Kestrel, and Grandfather Leanardo.

"Sit," Kestrel said.

The locket chain slipped between his fingers. Corbo clutched it tightly, holding his hopes and dreams in his heart. He sat next to Livia on the hard floor.

"They are bringing my father to die," Kestrel said.

Could this man they were bringing to die on the floor, be his father?

Two soldiers carried a stretcher into the room and placed it on the white sheet. Jonny was on it. His eyes glazed, each breath more shallow than the last.

"I too, was searching for my father," Kestrel said. "I found him at last."

Kestrel took the dying man's hands in his. "I wish I had found you sooner. You went in search of my aunt and soon to be cousin, and never came home."

Livia gasped.

Corbo took a deep breath, as he raised the clenched locket to his chest.

"My father, who is he?"

Grandfather Leanardo held out his hand. "Let me see your locket."

Corbo clutched it tighter to his chest. He didn't want to let it go.

He reached across the dying Jonny to hand the locket to Grandfather Leanardo.

The man took the locket, and opened it. He handed it to Kestrel.

"Yes uncle, it is a match."

Corbo was confused. They family dynamics he was seeing fall into place were unexpected, and difficult to figure out.

Chaplain Greg spoke. "Grandfather Leanardo, is that your real name?"

"Yes. And no. My brother-in-law, now known as Jonny, was nearly killed in the border conflict. I came here to see him, after I received the letter that my wife died. I knew there was a son named Corbo. The letter had a bullet through the pages, and I had no idea if he was alive, or dead," the man said.

The old man rocked on his heels. The pictures in the locket held his gaze. "Livia, I hope your mother is as beautiful as always."

"I guess so. Never thought of her as beautiful," Livia said.

"If I had known for sure you were alive. I would have searched for you."

He handed the locket back to Corbo. "I stayed with my brother-

in-law, and helped him. There was no chance he would remember his name, or family. I never mentioned his real name. When I would speak his name, or mine, he became dangerously agitated. So, I took my middle name, and became a grandfather to the population when I should have been a father. I am sorry."

"I never knew," Kestrel said. "You sent letters home. You never said anything."

"I did. To your mother. She wanted the best for you. And, you had a purpose, to save what you could of your father's traditions. She is proud of you. Keep up the good work."

The man on the floor groaned, and Kestrel turned to him. Jonny, as he had been known so many years, drew his last breath.

"Corbo, please forgive me, and I hope we can rebuild the family we should have had. I guess, I always hoped Jon and Anna would come here. If they had been arrested and brought through here, I would have known. And then, if you'd been with them, I would have found you. It was the only option I knew. I had no idea where to find them."

The older man held out his hand to Corbo.

Corbo's head spun with thoughts and feelings, much as it had that day in Livia's mom's deli. It was too much to know what was happening.

"I don't know you. How can I call you Dad?"

"You don't have to. I have another name here," the old man said.

"Come. We must bury Jonny before midday," Chaplain Greg said.

Grandfather Leanardo rocked backward. "No. The council will decide if he is to be buried, or cremated. With the recent news, we must form a more coherent community. It will no longer be Mexicans beside Tohono O'odham, beside Americans of every descent, and every other nationality represented in our village. We will form a coherent whole, and develop living, and dying, practices together."

"As you wish. Is there anything I can help with?" Chaplain Greg said.

"Yes, tomorrow. Corbo, Livia, will you be joining us?" Grandfather Leanardo said.

This man, his uncle had died. He had said one word to Corbo. He put the locket in his pocket. "I will help carry him, if that is okay with Kestrel?"

Kestrel nodded, tears in his eyes from the death of the father he barely remembered.

"Uncle, will my father's people be lost now?"

Grandfather Leanardo patted his hands. "No. They will recover. Here, we will build a new nation. If the local band that moved near this community soon after your father came here choose to join us, they may. Come, we will move Jonny's broken remains."

Grandfather Leanardo stood, moved to the feet of the dead man, and gave one hand to both Kestrel and Corbo.

The rest of the day blurred for Corbo as the community met to determine the best funeral practices for their future. In the end, the village determined to cremate Jonny as the sun sank the following day.

Corbo and Kestrel worked together throughout the day searching the remaining empty homes and business for potential fuel sources. They would have to work together now, and build a hope and future. All the fuel couldn't be used before winter. Some items might be useful later, and should be saved.

By late afternoon, piles of debris were ready to set alight.

As the evening sun filtered along the horizon, the immigrant villagers walked and cried as they carried the body of the man, Jonny, who had cheered them, and made them laugh through many a long night. He had never known who he was, or cared. In some ways, he had been like an overgrown child to the community, taking not quite done food from cooking pots, and playing ball with young boys. At other times, he had known when and how to break the tension, and ease relations between the soldiers and the community. Without Jonny, someone new would have to fill the gap between the cultures.

The tears were real as the human shell with the sunken face, broken teeth, and withered hands was laid to rest on the pile. One woman stepped forward with a tattered woven blanket, and placed it gently across his body.

Grandfather Leanardo and Kestrel held the pole with the firebrand to light the death shroud. Chaplain Greg stood behind on the left, with Corbo and Livia on the right.

At last, the fire took hold, as the sun sank below the horizon. Women chanted and moaned in multiple languages.

The ground swayed and trembled.

The air reverberated with sound.

The waves knocked them to the ground.

Corbo grabbed Livia's hand and looked north, out over the funeral pyre. There in the distance was a light glow. It lasted a

second. That one second in time and space, predicted how their lives had changed forever. That glow might mean Yellowstone had erupted. He knew Yellowstone should be too far off to see. It could also be one of the volcanoes they had passed in the San Francisco volcanic field. It was unlikely to see the glow form that distance either, unless the sky was clear enough. Of course, Yellowstone's eruption may have forced a new plume upwards, somewhere closer to Florence.

Even if he had Alex's knowledge, he would never abandon Livia to find out what was going on. It was too dangerous. He could die in a volcanic blast. Or, she could be hurt by raiders while he was gone. The truce between the village and the soldiers was so uneasy, it was safer to not take any chances. Their future child depended on both of them being alive and healthy. He pulled her close.

Perhaps Kestrel, or some of the other single people, could check out the local region before winter. They would need to search for local food sources, and abandoned farms anyway.

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Thanks!

Gail Brown

About the Author

Gail Brown began reading at far too young an age. Her preferred reading material was nonfiction, with biographies and science being at the forefront of her library excursions.

Her ability to memorize and use all the grammar rules in school years led to working in the school library while classmates caught up. All of those rules, and diagramming sentences was easy and relaxing. For many years. All forgotten now. Except the joyful memories of preparing the library for others to use.

Along the way, she found fiction and science fiction to help bring hope and light to a world of colorful dreams. A world where disability was accepted, people lived their lives without overwork and fear.

As an adult, gardening, and preparing the garden bounty, was her way to relax. To think. To make order out chaos.

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Concurrent Earths

Concurrent Earths is collection containing 40 short stories of Earth, or almost Earth, that may, or may not, exist.

These stories reach to us across the stars. They share a thought, a dream, or a hope. Stories that touch the heart and soul.

Whether a single individual, a community, or a society, each story delves into specific situations, and how they might benefit society.

Or, how they might go wrong.

Very wrong.

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Memories of a war they have never seen cross the dimensional boundary to Kalara and Leonard.

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Trails Series

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Trails 3: Tales
Time: 200 years in the future

Pair 2, Book 2
Trails 4: Mines
Time: 210 years in the future

The middens of the ancestors slowly empty. The last few usable pieces are found.

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